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**A Masculine Circle:
The Charter Myth of Genius
and its Effects on Women
Writers**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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To the memory of Wassily Chibici-Revneanu

Abstract

This dissertation examines the concept of artistic genius and its workings as a functional ‘charter myth’, helping to inscribe, enhance and perpetuate discriminative practices against women within the field of literature in general and novel writing in particular.

As an active agent as well as symbolic representation of some core patriarchal values such as the innate supremacy and thus justified dominance of men, the concept of genius operates in the following manner: Firstly, through its multiple mythical elements such as the untruth of its affirmations surrounding creativity combined with a paradoxical ability to nevertheless produce evidence for its seeming accuracy; its inherent narrative structure featuring a prescribed genius hero and tale and the latter’s powerful mythical allure, all of which help to push the prominence of genius despite its continued academic deconstruction. Secondly, through the subtle yet powerful gendering of the protagonist and plot pattern it provides, containing a clear blue-print for a hero with a male body complemented or opposed by a subordinate, non-genius female.

This gendered mythical pattern directly affects women writers in a variety of manners. On the one hand, it assists the lastingly biased reception of women authors, pre-imposing genius-inscribed beliefs of female inferiority onto literary judgments, thus cyclically perpetuating that belief. On the other – and most importantly for this thesis – the myth of genius also has an inward bearing on many female writers, impeding their creative process and development especially through the myth’s complex interaction with self-confidence as one of the core features necessary for a successful completion of literary projects such as novels.

In this manner, then, the notion of genius indeed acts a charter myth, often hindering the creative reception and production of women and therefore cyclically justifying and defending a perceived supremacy of literary men and maleness in general.

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up all the ways in which he has helped me bring this project (and so many others) to ‘life’.

Then why did she mind what he said? Women can't write, women can't paint...Why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort?

(V. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*)

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Genius as a charter myth:

Let us start by presenting this thesis' basic argument: It will be put forth that the concept of 'genius' can be interpreted as a charter myth in the sense outlined by the myth scholar Bronislaw Malinowski, encoding, enhancing and perpetuating a perceived supremacy of male creators. As such, it will be shown to negatively affect female artists both outwardly, with regard to their reception, and inwardly, with reference to the creative process itself.

This powerful function of what appears to be a relatively harmless cultural idea will be depicted as operating in the following manner. To begin with, it will be illustrated that the notion of genius can indeed be viewed as a myth in many, often surprising, ways. It not only contains a number of classically 'mythical' elements such as a concern with cultural origins and supernatural interventions, but also prescribes a narrative pattern for a specific protagonist and story. What is more, there is an implicit 'moral' to its tale – the superiority of male and inherent inferiority of female creators.

Now, this moral arises in part because – despite being an accolade seemingly applicable to any individual displaying a unique merit – its narrative pattern actually presumes a male protagonist at its very core. The few female creators who have sometimes been regarded as 'geniuses' (such as George Eliot or Virginia Woolf) tend to simply be used to confirm the notion of genius as a supposedly 'open category', while in reality representing female artists as atypical exceptions, leaving the belief in masculinity as a key feature of the 'normal', representative genius intact.

The gendered myth of genius then operates outwardly to negatively affect the reception of women's work, by imposing itself on the very process of artistic evaluation to constantly affirm its own bias of female inferiority. This is largely possible because mythical structures – and especially 'genius', being of such lasting cultural importance – appear to be involved in the highly subjective process of (artistic) perception itself, helping to structure and guide it.

But, as implied, the myth also works inwardly by affecting the creative process itself. If this seems counter-intuitive at first (we have a firm cultural conviction that only the 'truth' can be a helpful source of orientation for our actions), theories such as those by Albert Bandura¹ or Peter Wolson² have raised our awareness that beliefs, and especially self-beliefs, can have a crucial influence on creation, regardless of their 'accuracy'. This is above all due to artistic production being a highly personal and motivational matter, heavily reliant on individuals' personal initiative. Therefore, if people regard themselves as able to perform a creative task, this will usually guide them through the creative process and develop the very ability they already believed themselves to possess.

In more concrete terms, artists who use the tale of genius as an empathic source of reference for their identity formation – a phenomenon that will be referred to as 'positive identification' – benefit from a variety of positive effects such as increased (internal) motivation and – most importantly for this thesis – the creatively vital feature of confidence. At the same time, however, the notion

¹ E.g. Albert Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy', in V.S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour*, New York: Academic Press, 1994 [consulted at <<http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/BanEncy.html>>, June 2006].

² Peter Wolson, 'The Vital Role of Adaptive Grandiosity in Artistic Creativity', *Psychoanalytical Review*, 82.4, (August 1995), pp. 577-97 [consulted at <<http://www.laisps.org/papers/pdf/laisps%20scientific%20papers%20-%20adaptive%20grandiosity.pdf>> (accessed March 2010)].

of genius can also contribute to the exact reverse (subsequently called ‘negative identification’), blocking those artists who believe themselves incapable of reaching the supposed heights of innate excellence the myth implies. Now, although men may also fall prey to this latter phenomenon, it will be argued that the very gendering of genius has made this problem far more pronounced for women, even resulting in their work not being finished, or even started.

It is in this complex manner, then, that the romantic belief in genius will be shown to have operated – historically and to this day – as a Malinowskian charter myth. By providing a deeply gendered mythical pattern for a number of masculine protagonists and tales, it has provided a misleading cognitive source of reference for ‘great’ authors to be identified and aspiring writers to identify themselves with. Consequently, it has both helped to outwardly prejudice reception in men’s favour and inwardly affected the creative process itself, perpetuating its moral of masculine superiority in a nearly perfect masculine circle. Far from being a mere idea, the concept of genius uses its mythical properties to impose itself on reality and recreate it in the image of its heroic protagonist and tale.

1.2. Basic facts and definitions:

Having delineated the core argument of this thesis, it is time to present more specific background information and definitions for the three central concepts of ‘genius’, ‘gender(ed)’, and ‘charter myth’. In addition, we will glimpse at the basic manner in which the gendered myth of genius then assumes its charter myth functions through a profoundly anti-female ‘narrative moral’.

Genius:

Starting with the word ‘genius’, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* provides as many as five different meanings:

1. exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability.
2. an exceptionally intelligent or able person.
3. ...a spirit associated with a person, place, or institution.
4. the prevalent character or spirit of a nation, period, etc..
- [5.] –genius loci: the prevailing character or atmosphere of a place.³

As suggested, the ensuing discussion will primarily rely on the second and person-centred conception of the word, where genius becomes a physical incarnation and historical (or narrative) figure, usually replete with a particular set of character features such as mental instability, outsider status and a superhuman destiny of artistic vocation. Nevertheless, occasional reference shall also be made to the other meanings, as they turn out to have a lasting bearing on the overall connotative properties of this person-oriented usage of the term.

In addition, the discussion will also at times mention innate talent (very much like the first definition of ‘natural ability’ provided) and the figure of the so-called ‘serious artist’ as directly connected to and often virtually synonymous with this thesis’ central concept of genius. For even though the belief in ‘mere talent’ is seemingly opposed to that of the grand accolade and not every serious artist is necessarily regarded as a genius, the latter may still be interpreted as representing the ideational essence and height of them both. In many ways, a

³ Judy Pearsall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) [on CD-Rom].

genius can therefore be considered the illustrative instance of talent and the serious artist in their most extreme and celebrated form, wherefore the conceptual difference between them – ultimately – becomes only one of degrees.

Incidentally, this close link between genius and talent, as well as its multiple meanings, are deeply inscribed in the historical development of the word and concept, of which we shall now provide an introductory overview. To begin with, then, ‘genius’ may be described as a conceptual unification and incorporation of an array of different ideas, many of which have a long, individual history. As such, several now associated elements such as madness, innate talent,⁴ and inspiration through the help of muses already take their origin in ancient Greece. The word itself, on the other hand, stems from ancient Rome, where the Latin term ‘genius’ was first used to describe a spirit concerned with physical, then increasingly metaphysical reproduction.

Interestingly, the idea of genius survives throughout the Middle Ages, both taking the form of good and evil spirits (demons) and of an allegorical Genius figure as a crucial feature of many works of Medieval literature. In addition, the notion (as its association with good and bad spirits already implies) absorbed a number of Christian ideas along its path, becoming closely connected to this religion’s logic and imagery.

During the Renaissance, an overall mixing of separate notions begins to take place. As the historian of the genius idea Edgar Zilsel states in his

⁴ One of the most significant historians of the genius idea’s classical origins, Penelope Murray, for instance, discusses how allusions to innate talent can already be found in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, where it is assumed that ‘either a Muse or Apollo must have taught’ the praised bard Demodocus. Penelope Murray, ‘Poetic Genius and its Classical Origins’, in Penelope Murray (ed.), *Genius – The History of an Idea* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1999), p. 11.

monumental work *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes* ('The Rise of the Concept of Genius'):⁵

The antique demons and geniuses are still alive in the faith of the people; but it is only during the Christian Renaissance that genius becomes part of an educated literary mythology – and it is in this manner that it could come into direct contact with the metaphysics of ingenium and the inspiration of poets.⁶

As several other scholars such as Christine Battersby have also outlined, what appears to be of particular importance for our modern understanding of genius is a gradual fusion of the word 'genius' as a spirit/figure with the Latin concept of 'ingenium' (individual and innate talent), the latter assuming great cultural importance during this historical period.

Nevertheless, it is – of course – during pre-Romanticism and Romanticism that the notion of genius takes on its 'final' form. Arguably, in a reaction both to an increasing sense of alienation during the Industrial Revolution, as well as – within the field of art – the rigid rules of Neoclassicism, the idea of the inspired, irrational creator-hero becomes celebrated by a vast number of different publications, some of the most influential being Joseph Addison's essay 'Genius' (1711) in the magazine *The Spectator*, Edward

⁵ My translation.

⁶ Edgar Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1972), pp. 292-3 (my translation).

Young's treatise 'Conjectures on Original Composition' (1759) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790) among many more.⁷

Although by no means a fixed and unchangeable entity,⁸ the genius idea then seems to steadily increase its influence on our perception of creativity, undergoing a particular revival towards the early twentieth century and the literary period known as 'modernism'. As works produced during that period, such as Thomas Mann's and Joyce's novels to be referred to later on in this thesis show, this phase – in a manner not dissimilar from Romanticism – is once again marked by a particularly strong celebration of individual artists as heroes in an increasingly alienated world, as well as a cult of originality and the breaking of traditions through innovation.

Naturally, the use of the genius idea also becomes increasingly complex. On the one hand, as the twentieth century ends and the twenty-first century begins, the criticism and thorough deconstruction of the concept become almost the academic norm. On the other, both its popular usage and, even within academia, numerous of its most basic implications have remained intact and as powerful as ever. As Christine Battersby, for instance, outlines in her work *Gender and Genius*:

⁷ Among the countless other examples one may also mention the previously referred to writings on genius by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in works such as 'Lectures on Aesthetic' or William Hazlitt's 'On Genius and Common Sense'. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Lectures on Aesthetic', *Marxist.Org* [consulted at <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/ch01.htm>> (accessed November 2010)] and William Hazlitt, "On Genius and Common Sense", from *Table Talk – Essays on Men and Manners*, *Blupete* [consulted at <<http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Essays/Hazlitt/TableTalk/Genius.htm>> (accessed January 2011)].

⁸ Note, for instance, that for the philosopher Kant, the genius accolade is explicitly reserved for artists only, whereas the term then also becomes increasingly applied to scientists and other innovators.

Indeed, once one starts listening and watching out for the word ‘genius’, it is soon noticeable how much work this word still does in the description and evaluation of cultural achievement. Even those academics who have given up using the word often still cling to the old assumptions about genius in the way they talk, write and think about creativity.⁹

Of course, as the quote already implies, the genius myth now often seems to operate in a more subtle manner, which is precisely why it strikes one as a crucial one to tease out and uncover the manifold ways in which it continues to promote its multiple forms of discrimination against women.

Gender(ed)

Throughout this work, I shall essentially rely on the feminist Carolyn Korsmeyer’s definition of the word ‘gendered’ in her work *Gender and Aesthetics* as referring to a phenomenon which ‘appears to be generic or neutral’,¹⁰ whereas in reality it is ‘one where there is a hidden skew in connotation or import, such that the idea in question pertains most centrally to males, or in certain cases to females.’¹¹ In our present case, it will be shown that the category of genius is gendered to the extent that its pattern for a protagonist often requires a male anatomy, wherefore one may even apply the somewhat old-fashioned term of ‘sexed’.

In fact – as to this thesis’ general use of such seemingly simply terms as ‘woman’ or ‘man’, ‘female’ or ‘male’ – the ensuing discussion virtually returns

⁹ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women’s Press, 1989), p. 16.

¹⁰ Carolyn, Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics – An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.

¹¹ Id.

to the outdated notion of ‘sex’, assuming that men and women, although far more similar than often conceived,¹² do have some significant anatomical/procreative differences.¹³

Of course, I thoroughly agree with Socrates’ view in Plato’s *The Republic*, where he explains the absurdity of then deducing innate characteristics and vocational destinies from such physical variances. As he states: ‘we might just as well, on this principle, ask ourselves whether bald men and long-haired men are of the same or opposite natures, and, having agreed that they are opposite, allow bald men to be cobblers and forbid long-haired men to be, or vice versa.’¹⁴

If this thesis – albeit always leaving a conceptual space for exceptions – nonetheless dares to present some generalisations about men and women, it is because these differences, apart from leading to some distinct experiences, have often been systematically interpreted in such an essentialist manner by the genius myth in particular and patriarchy at large.¹⁵ This, in turn, has often enforced these constructions onto a gendered reality which we shall come to analyse.

¹² As gender theorist Kimmel importantly states with regard to this: ‘the differences between women and men are not to be nearly as great as are the differences among women or among men. Many perceived differences turn out to be differences based less on gender than on the social position people occupy.’ Michael S. Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4.

¹³ This does not mean that these differences are always clear (there are always significant exceptions such as hermaphrodites or people like the Austrian writer Julian Schutting, who had her/his female body changed to that of a man) or that these are not artificially emphasised by society (e.g. women are often encouraged to shave their body hair in some ways to increase their physical difference from men etc.). Still, female and male bodies are self-evidently not identical – and to deny this would, arguably, be to the detriment of both.

¹⁴ Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 104.

¹⁵ In fact, one of the dominant, albeit seemingly antiquated ways of thinking about men and women is gender essentialism or what theorist Elaine Storkey, with reference to scholar John Joseph Goux, calls ‘premodern’ thinking. The latter is ‘characterized by fixed order, fixed roles, and fixed explanations, reinforced by accepted tradition. At its heart lies essentialism, the idea that a certain “essence” defines the center of our identity as human beings and as men and women. In gender terms this means that men have certain identifiable, fixed characteristics, and women have other identifiable, fixed characteristics, and that these identifiers are rooted in our very nature.’ Elaine Storkey, *Origins of Difference – The Gender Debate Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) pp. 25-6.

Charter Myth

Even though a more detailed account of myth will be provided later on, let us now turn towards an explanation of the presently most relevant aspects of Malinowski's concept of charter myth, which is naturally crucial to understanding this thesis as a whole.

At the outset, then, the term as defined by Malinowski in his classic *Myth in Primitive Psychology* encapsulates the theorist's belief that myth fulfils an 'indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies belief...it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.'¹⁶

To further clarify the concept, let us present one of Malinowski's own examples for such a functional tale. In his previously mentioned work, the scholar provides the instance of a Melanesian charter of origin, during which a dog and a pig, each representatives of one of their communities' clans, emerge from a pre-life underground and

the dog, seeing the fruit of the noku plant, nosed it and then ate it. Said the Pig: 'Thou eatest noku, thou eatest dirt; thou art a low-bred, a commoner; the chief, the guya'u, shall be I.' And ever since, the highest sub-clan of the Malasi clan, the Tabalu [represented by the pig] have been the real chiefs.¹⁷

We can see how this story – which Malinowski presents as central to that particular culture – is indeed far from being a simply entertaining or aesthetically

¹⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (Westport Connecticut: Negro Universities, 1974), p.19.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp.37-8.

satisfying tale. Rather, it is an 'active force' which puts forth justifications for the overall domination of the pig clan, codifying their supposed superiority and perpetuating it by appealing to a higher and 'original' principle. As charter myths tend to, it therefore attempts to brush over 'social strain, such as in matters of great difference in rank and power'¹⁸ by inventing a fiction perceived as more relevant and seemingly more 'authentic' than reality itself.

Of course, Malinowski emphasises that charter myths never re-enforce a social structure of dominance and submission on their own, but operate in direct and inseparable conjunction with a society's value system as a whole. Consequently, people begin to endorse their meaning not only through the story itself, but also by 'living within the social texture'¹⁹ of their world. At the same time, these myths also seem to become a literal charter of a social system, a 'symbol' of its cultural operations at large.²⁰

This leads us to the complex historical nature of charter myths. On the one hand, they tend to arise in response to a given historical situation, while on the other assisting to *form* the cultural outlines of future developments in their cultural image. As such Malinowski stresses how 'the historical consideration of myth is interesting...in that it shows that myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober dispassionate history, since it is always made *ad hoc* to fulfil a certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status.'²¹ Still, it also symbolically encodes and thus actively enhances pre-existing traditions, for 'the function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁰ Or, in Malinowski's own words: 'on the one hand the reality of myth lies in its social function; on the other hand, once we begin to study the social function of myth, and so to reconstruct its full meaning, we are gradually led to build up the full theory of native social organization.' Ibid., p. 44.

²¹ Ibid., p. 58.

and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events.²² In this manner, a charter tale must be seen as intricately woven into the imaginative fabric of a given society, both helping to justify the pre-existing status quo of a given group, as well as (re)creating its power through providing it with a profound narrative justification.

It is therefore this thesis' claim that the idea of genius subtly yet powerfully operates in a highly comparative manner to Malinowski's Melanesian charter tale. In effect, it is almost as if our Western genius narrative centred on a story where a representative of all men declared to the narrative symbol of women: 'Thou bringest forth babies and bad literature, thou art a low-bred, a commoner; the chief... shall be I.' And ever since, the highest clan of patriarchy, men, have been the real chiefs.

Now, before moving onto the next section, three more factors are worth highlighting with regard to this. Firstly, it is crucial to note that the genius myth can only impose this sense of masculine superiority by – indirectly – also operating in a symbolical manner not dissimilar to that of the Melanesian tale. Even though it seems as though our genius stories are specific accounts of outstanding individuals only, they often simultaneously fulfil an allegorical function, referring to a group as a whole. We are familiar enough with this operation when it comes to our own national heroes: Shakespeare or Cervantes, for the English or Spanish, are not only celebrated for having been exceptional in themselves but also, precisely, because they are taken to stand for an entire

²² Ibid, p. 92.

nation's potential abilities.²³ In a similar, although less evident, manner, the gendered 'genius' figure often comes to act as a representative of all *men*. As the Austrian theorist Otto Weininger states at the turn of the previous century: 'A female genius is a contradiction in terms, for genius is simply intensified, perfectly developed, universally conscious maleness.'²⁴ Just as mentioned with regard to genius in many ways representing the height of innate talent and the figure of the 'serious artist', it also subtly comes to symbolise the epitome of masculinity.

Naturally – and this is the second factor to be considered here – the moral of the genius tale tends to be narrated in a somewhat different manner from the Melanesian myth about pigs and dogs. On the whole, it appears to function through written or imagined lists of geniuses which almost exclusively consist of men.²⁵ As the following example from Michael Howe's *Genius Explained* may illustrate:

A limited number of individuals are very widely regarded as having been geniuses: Archimedes, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Copernicus, Galileo, Michelangelo, Newton, Darwin, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Shakespeare, Rembrandt and Einstein would be placed in that category by most educated people in the English-speaking world, as might be some others, perhaps including Dickens, Schubert, George Eliot, Tolstoy,

²³ As a matter of fact, one here begins to glance at the interconnectedness of the various genius definitions mentioned earlier on. For this symbolic meaning of national geniuses reminds one of the word as referring to 'the prevalent character or spirit of a nation, period, etc.'.

²⁴ Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (London: William Heinemann, 1906) [consulted at <<http://www.theabsolute.net/ottow/schareng.pdf>> (accessed March 2010)], p.115.

²⁵ Of course, it is not suggested that these lists are part of a deliberate attempt to misrepresent the extent of female achievement. Rather, they should be interpreted as visible symptoms of countless complex, cyclical phenomena which contribute to the discrimination against female writers to be discussed throughout this thesis.

Tchaikovsky, Balzac, van Gogh, and Flaubert. But what about Trollope, Coleridge, Renoir, Monet, Manet, Degas, Turner and Jane Austen? And should we include Emily Brontë, Benjamin Franklin, Marie Curie, Puccini, Verdi, Brunel, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Edgar Allan Poe, or James Joyce?²⁶

Here, we find no women in the midst of the most eminent, with George Eliot being the only female amid the ‘second-rank’ geniuses, and a handful of women being mentioned among those whose genius status is up for discussion. Even though, as we shall see, Howe is himself highly critical of the concept, his list is not only fairly representative of who is generally awarded with genius status, but it also clearly demonstrates the normative cultural hero as male.

Or, as can be further highlighted through a fairly recent publication, *The Observer Book of Genius*, and its presentation of the following ‘genius’ writers: ‘Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, Vladimir Nabokov, Mark Twain, William Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust, Anton Chekov, George Eliot.’²⁷ Once again, George Eliot is the only token woman amongst eight male ‘geniuses’.

Finally (and as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three), although there is nowadays an increased awareness that this general absence of women from the elevated ranks of genius is, at least in part, related to their subordinate position within patriarchy and a consequent lack of opportunities, there is nevertheless a lasting tendency to consciously or subconsciously conclude that this lack of female geniuses may be a sign of their general, innate

²⁶ Michael J.A Howe, *Genius Explained* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 13.

²⁷ Carl Wilkinson (ed.), *The Observer Book of Genius* (London: Observer Books, 2007), p. 76.

inferiority. As a female character in the recent bestseller *The Interpretation of Murder* by the novelist Jed Rubenfeld explains:

Well, since you force me, gentlemen...I'll confess our secret. Women are men's inferiors. I know it is backward of me to say so, but to deny it is a folly. All of mankind's riches, material and spiritual, are men's creations. Our towering cities, our science, art, and music – all built, discovered, painted, and composed by you men.²⁸

Or as Tillie Olson recounts in her book *Silences* with regard to a conference on women's liberation she attended:

Only a few months ago, during a Radcliffe sponsored panel on 'Women's Liberation, Myth or Reality', Diana Trilling, asking why it is that women 'have not made a fraction of the intellectual, scientific or artistic-cultural contribution which men have made' came again to the traditional conclusion that 'it is not enough to blame women's place in culture or culture itself, because that leaves certain fundamental questions unanswered...necessarily raises the question of the biological aspect of the problem.'²⁹

²⁸ To be fair to the author, the book is not only set at the turn of the century (wherefore it may be seen as simply presenting views common at the time), but the speech is also delivered by a character, Clara, who eventually turns out to be charged for murder. Nonetheless, these words are by no means presented within a context of disapproval or a notion that this might be a very foolish thing to say. On the contrary, even the most sympathetic hero of the tale treats her words as a form of revelation, explaining that: 'Mrs Banwell [Clara] might have just explained the wild extremes of conflicting emotion his own mother had displayed toward his father'. See Jed, Rubenfeld, *The Interpretation of Murder* (London: Headline Review, 2006), pp. 283-4.

²⁹ Tillie Olson, *Silences* (25th anniversary edn, New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 25.

Both quotes clearly manifest how the absence of female geniuses can and has often been interpreted as a sign of women's innate unfitness to innovate and/or create great art. This – just like the Melanesian tale establishing the dominance of the pig over the dog clan – has in turn often acted as a (frequently unspoken) justification for their inferior status and continued discrimination.

1.3. Personal motivation

After this outline of the core argument and some of the key concepts deployed to present it, let me briefly turn to my personal motivation for looking at genius as a gendered charter myth. Above all, I was driven to the present research because of repeatedly encountering unsettling pieces of evidence for a wide-spread belief that women were somehow not as fit for artistic creation as men.

As a young girl, I was often confronted with (and confused by) an exposition of the genius myth's narrative moral of female inferiority. Once, for instance, on browsing through a music magazine, I came across an article on the 'fact' that women were genetically incapable of being great composers – which was precisely 'proven' by the absence of female Mozarts, Bachs and the like from the musical canon. Another time, a middle-aged lady decided to reveal to me a secret theory of hers; namely that women were inherently incapable of producing great art because – quite naturally – they could have babies!

Years later, as an editorial assistant at a UK literary publishing house, I encountered a new version of this, when a junior editor whispered to me that a particular female writer on the list was really so good because 'she wrote like a man'. Such occurrences unsettled me, leaving a nagging doubt alongside a

conviction that something simply was not quite right – or perhaps even terribly wrong – about these ideas.

Unfortunately (and this has been an observation I encountered over and over again by feminists and female writers during my research³⁰) there was not much in my literature BA which prepared me for contradicting such claims with confidence. Even though I followed a programme that was innovative in many ways, the vast majority of writers we studied were male. Indeed, it was not until I had already embarked on the present investigation that I met with the sheer infinite amount of historically important female writers such as Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Margaret Oliphant, among many, many more. All in all, then, I was struck by how in an age where, supposedly, all feminist inquiries and requirements had become outdated and women had already ‘achieved everything’, such discriminative practices and beliefs continued to exist.

Finally, it was during my MA in Creative and Media Enterprises that I started to notice another aspect so crucial for the present discussion: Our lastingly romantic and deeply mythical approach to creativity, resulting in an often – paradoxically – secular ‘religion of art’.³¹ At first, for an MA thesis on the belief in ‘artistic vocation’, I simply investigated whether creators may be

³⁰ As is summed up in Rivkin’s and Ryan’s work ‘Introduction: Feminist Paradigms’: ‘Early on, feminist scholars realized that the “canon” taught in schools was overwhelmingly male...Were there no women writers, then, aside from George Eliot and Jane Austen, Willa Cather or Emily Dickinson?’ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, ‘Introduction - Feminist Paradigms’, in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory - An Anthology* (Oxford: 2nd edn, Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 766.

³¹ The famous novelist Margaret Atwood refers to this phenomenon in her work *Negotiating with the Dead*, where she states: ‘in the West, as religion lost helium in society at large, the Real Presence crept back into the realm of art. Throughout the nineteenth century, the perception of the artist’s role shifted; by the end of it, he or she was to serve this mystic entity – Art with a capital A – by assisting in the creation of sacred space, as contained within the borders.’ Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead - A Writer on Writing* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), p. 61.

influenced by such mythical concepts in their creative endeavours and whether it fulfilled any particular functions for them. While doing so, however, I started to have a growing suspicion regarding the subtle gendering of such mythical concepts. It was there that I began to notice a possible connection between the phenomena of gender discrimination in the arts and their impressive spiritualisation, the latter perhaps being a basic ‘method’ behind the former’s ‘madness’ – and the idea and motivation for my present research was born.

1.4. Focusing

The novel

Moving on to outline the particular focus of this thesis, I will primarily look at the way the notion of genius has functioned within the field of literature, and more specifically that of novel writing. This decision has been motivated by several different factors. To begin with, the operations of the genius myth are in many ways so complex and vast that only a limitation to one particular area of creative endeavour can grant any exact and detailed insights. Secondly, the novel may also be regarded as a particularly ‘mythical’ genre in its own right (especially with its escapist offerings to ‘step out of time’),³² and has, as we have already seen with regard to *The Interpretation of Murder*, also played a crucial role in spreading and perpetuating the idea of genius itself.

Furthermore, the novel is a particularly interesting case in that it is one of the art forms most open to and reliant upon personal initiative and consequently also the genius myth’s interplay with motivational factors which enhance or

³² As Eliade states in his work *Myth and Reality*: ‘What we consider important is the fact that in modern societies the prose narrative, especially the novel, has taken the place of the recitation of myth in traditional and popular societies.’ Mircea Eliade *Myth and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 191.

hinder creative development. Indeed, the prose genre neither necessitates great financial investment (as film making, for example) nor lengthy formal training (like dance or musical performance). As a result, it is largely up to individuals' (often genius informed) self-image whether they choose themselves as future novelists and mobilise the efforts needed to fulfil this idea.

But the reasons for focusing on this particular genre go still further than that. As a matter of fact, the novel is frequently viewed as the one field of creativity where women have 'excelled'.³³ Therefore, it may be regarded as a particularly revealing point for the present investigation, manifesting how even in an area of supposed female ability, the concept of genius has helped to promote the overall, perceived, superiority of men.

Ultimately, this genre has been chosen because the creation of both the novel and the notion of genius also show some considerable historical overlap, both being children of the Industrial Revolution³⁴ and the associated cultural changes of (pre-)Romanticism. As a result, it will be argued that the myth of genius arose in part as a response to the emergence of this new narrative form, especially due to its strong association with femininity.

³³ The previously quoted scholar Carolyn Korsmeyer, for instance, expresses this view in her work 'Feminist Aesthetics': 'while there have been relatively few "great" women artists, they have not been altogether absent from the historical record. What is more, there are certain art forms in which women were the pioneers, such as the prose novel.' Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'Feminist Aesthetics', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, First published 7 May 2004; substantive revision 26 June 2008 [consulted at <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-aesthetics>> (accessed December 2009)].

³⁴ Indeed, the novel can be seen as an offspring of an emerging eighteenth-century capitalist economy and the growth of print culture.

The West

With regard to the geographical focus of this work, particular emphasis will be paid to England as a place so crucial for the development of the novel³⁵ and (alongside the USA) in many ways dominating today's publishing world. In effect, in his work *Literature, Money and the Market – From Trollope to Amis*, Paul Delany highlights how 'regardless of where they are written or read, bestsellers are made in London and New York, as surely as film stars are now made in Hollywood'.³⁶ Also, he quotes the scholar Aijaz Ahmad's observation that 'countries of the Third World have little direct access to each other's cultural productions. Indians, for example, don't import novels from Latin America. We read only those Latin American novels which get translated and published in English, in place like London and New York.'³⁷

At the same time – given the myth's close connection to an overall Greco-Roman/Christian cultural heritage and its arguable implications in the formation of an almost exclusively Western canon of 'great art' – examples will also be drawn from the Western world in general, to illustrate quite how powerful the impact of this mythical notion has been.

³⁵ Of course, the supposed origins of the novel largely depends on its particular definition, wherefore – for instance - the eleventh century *Tale of Genji* by the female author [sic] Murasaki Shikibu or Miguel de Cervantes' early seventeenth century *Don Quixote* are both not infrequently referred to as the first novels. Nonetheless, despite many limitations of this study precisely with regard to its gendering (only men are proposed as the 'fathers' of the novel), the scholar Ian Watt puts forward the convincing argument in *The Rise of the Novel – Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* that a particularly realist orientation of the novel so central to the development of the genre as a whole can be largely traced to writers operating within eighteenth-century England. See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel – Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

³⁶ Paul Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market – From Trollope to Amis* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 191.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

History and Today

Throughout this research I shall make reference to contemporary as well as historical data. The latter is important because it is only by gaining a general overview of the history of genius, the novel and past discriminative practices that we can study at their most explicit the nowadays often more subtle forms in which the myth operates against female writers. Also, it is precisely this past which has given shape to our present – and almost entirely male dominated – literary canon which represents such a lasting and formative part of our cultural heritage.

The need to look at the situation with respect to our present times arises from the fact that some things have begun to change and an awareness of practices against women in the field has increased. Therefore, contemporary examples will frequently manifest such slight changes or improvements, while nonetheless illustrating how strikingly alive certain forms of genius-related gender discriminations continue to be. In fact, it seems that to this day, when women writers lay claim to significant territories within the literary sphere, the myth of genius appears with renewed power to push them behind culturally diminishing boundaries.

1.5. Genius in its context: Creativity literature and beyond

After dwelling on the specific focus of this research, it now becomes necessary to place it within an overall context of existing research and literature. The present investigation aims to situate itself primarily within the area of creativity studies, not only because of its inherent interest in the nature of artistic creation, but also

because the myth of genius in many ways lies at the field's very foundations.³⁸ Still, the subject at hand also calls for an intensely cross-disciplinary approach and many different areas, among those most prominently feminist aesthetics, feminist literary studies, cultural studies, and myth studies, as well as investigations into the nature and processes of creative writing³⁹ have been drawn upon. In addition – and as will be emphasised during the last chapter of this thesis – all of these fields are, of course, ultimately relevant to questions of cultural policy, both in a narrow and a more general definition of the term.⁴⁰

To gain a basic overview which will subsequently be elaborated upon within each relevant chapter, let us begin by glancing at the central domain of creativity studies, as well as some relevant aspects from the related area of cultural studies. On the one hand, then, the former seems to have acted for many decades as one of the key preservers of the genius view proper within academic circles, still focusing on the concept when other areas such as literary studies had long become wary of it.⁴¹ At the same time, and possibly as a direct reaction to

³⁸ Indeed, one may argue that the field of creativity research has arisen as a direct response to the notion of genius, with the somewhat paradoxical intention of studying and explaining this 'mysterious' phenomenon in a more scientific manner. Among the many possible examples for this one may refer directly to Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius*, often regarded – if by now heavily criticised – as one of the founding texts of this investigative domain. See Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius - An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972, c1869).

³⁹ Works from this ever-growing field – e.g. John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction - Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage, 1991) or Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird – Some Instructions On Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor, 1995), among many, many more – have been consulted for two reasons. Firstly because they fill a frequent gap within creativity research, looking not only at artistic innovation in general, but also at the field of novel writing, in particular. Secondly, given that they have usually been written by authors themselves, they also provide direct insights into the way writers deploy mythical thinking about the creative process to enhance (or block) their creations.

⁴⁰ See, for instance, the eloquent definition by Jim McGuigan: 'Like policy in general, cultural policy can be viewed narrowly and/or broadly: narrowly, in the sense of what those in charge of it actually do and the consequences of their actions; and broadly, in the sense of disputation over cultural issues.' Jim McGuigan, *Rethinking Cultural Policy* (Maidenhead: Open University, 2004), p. 5.

⁴¹ Whereas literary studies at the very least since Roland Barthes' monumental 'Death of the Author' (in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977)) have often been mistrustful of the genius-cult, scientific investigations into the nature of genius virtually exploded during the latter

its previous importance, it has by now been from within this domain that the notion of genius has become most elaborately and eloquently attacked. Among works with such a deconstructive focus – now the dominant strand – there is a notable consensus that many if not most assumptions contained by the genius view are inaccurate and that, among many other elements highlighted by each individual researcher, artistic reception is a complex social negotiation and the creative process itself is heavily dependent upon motivational and dynamic psychological factors.⁴²

During the subsequent chapter, the question as to why and how the myth of genius remains of such significant cultural impact despite such growing convictions against it will be looked at in some detail. For the moment, suffice it to name some important works exemplifying this ‘anti-genius’ consensus, such as Margaret Boden’s *The Creative Mind*, with its profound questioning of romantic assumptions about innovation⁴³ or Michael Howe’s undermining of ‘talent’ in his work *Genius Explained*.⁴⁴ Malcolm Gladwell displays a comparable, deconstructive view of innate ability in his work ‘The Talent Myth’,⁴⁵ as well as outlining the vast influence of historical circumstances on

half of the twentieth century, with works such as Arthur Koestler’s *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1976, c1964), Anthony Storr’s *The Dynamics of Creation* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), Robert S. Albert’s (ed.) *Genius and Eminence - The Social Psychology of Creativity and Exceptional Achievement* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1983), Dean Keith Simonton’s *Origins of Genius - Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity* (Oxford, New York: University, 1999), to name only a few.

⁴² As will be explained in the subsequent chapter, this is to say that creativity is not so much dependent on a set of innate psychological characteristics, but on a psychological disposition which in itself waxes and wanes in direct interaction with a given environment.

⁴³ Margaret Boden, *The Creative Mind - Myths and Mechanisms* (London: Abacus, 1992), pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ Howe, *Genius Explained*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ Malcolm Gladwell, ‘The Talent Myth – Are Smart People Overrated?’, *The New Yorker*, 22 July 2002, pp. 28-32 [consulted at <<http://www.gladwell.com/pdf/talent.pdf>>, accessed December 2010)].

achievement in his book *Outliers*.⁴⁶ In addition, one must not forget the contributions by Robert Weisberg which, in extensive studies such as *Creativity – Genius and Other Myths*,⁴⁷ *Creativity – Beyond the Myth of Genius*⁴⁸ and *Creativity – Understanding Innovation in Problem Solving, Science, Invention and The Arts*,⁴⁹ deeply criticise the common notions that artistic creation is reliant on extraordinary thought processes and, by extension, outstanding individuals.

Weisberg furthermore emphasises that the belief in ‘geniuses’ as creators of inherently and universally valuable⁵⁰ works is largely incorrect.⁵¹ This has – among several other fields such as reception studies – also been significantly addressed within the closely related domain of cultural studies, where scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu or John Carey have provided their own complex analyses of the matter. In famous works such as *Distinction*⁵² or *The Rules of Art*,⁵³ the former respectively highlights the social construction of artistic values and the entire artistic field. In many ways taking this one step further, Carey, in *What Good are the Arts?*, argues for the ultimate relativity of artistic judgments,

⁴⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers – The Story of Success* (London, New York: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 18-19.

⁴⁷ Robert Weisberg, *Creativity – Genius and Other Myths* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1986), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Robert Weisberg, *Creativity – Beyond the Myth of Genius* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1993), p. 3.

⁴⁹ Robert Weisberg, *Creativity – Understanding Innovation in Problem Solving, Science, Invention and the Arts* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), e.g. pp. 196-7.

⁵⁰ In this manner, he for instance claims in his work *Creativity – Beyond the Myth of Genius*: ‘There are probably no universally appreciated works of art of any sort, and therefore no universal geniuses, much though we may believe that what we look upon as the work of genius must be appreciated in the same way by everyone.’ Weisberg, *Beyond the Myth of Genius*, p.80.

⁵¹ He is, of course, by no means the only one to do so from within the field of creativity studies. In Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s influential ‘Creativity and Genius – A Systems Perspective’, the scholar, for instance, shows that ‘The location of genius is not in any particular individual’s mind, but in a virtuous space, or system, where an individual interacts with a cultural domain and with a social field.’ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Creativity and Genius – A Systems Perspective’, in Andrew Steptoe (ed.), *Genius and the Mind, Studies of Creativity and Temperament* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University, 1998), p. 39.

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction – A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992, c1984), p. 1.

⁵³ Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Rules of Art – Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009, c1986), e.g. p. xvii.

claiming that ‘Value...is not intrinsic in objects, but attributed to them by whoever is doing the valuing.’⁵⁴As a result, he reaches the controversial conclusion that ‘a work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for one person.’⁵⁵

While all of these contributions have significantly informed the present discussion, many of them nonetheless share a crucial limitation: Despite their complete dedication to attacking the genius view, many theorists (as has previously been implied) also seem to be unable to let go of the term and its basic assumptions altogether. This may, again, be illustrated with regard to Weisberg, who in *Creativity – Genius and Other Myths*, makes the following comment about Bach and his tendency to re-use existing melodies in his work: ‘Indeed, one aspect of Bach’s genius [sic] was his ability to borrow a piece from another and turn it into something immeasurably finer.’⁵⁶ This perhaps unconscious allusion to ‘genius’ in the midst of its rampant destruction can be seen as far more than an interesting error. It already becomes a sign of the resilience of the myth, where its partial endorsement can happily – if paradoxically – coincide with a heavy, conscious, criticism of it.

In addition, and in some ways most relevantly for this thesis’ inquiries, the vast majority of creativity studies still display an all too familiar tendency of supposedly talking about male *and* female creators, when really their interest is strikingly geared towards men. Among the countless examples of this, one may quote from Robert S. Albert, who in his ‘A Developmental Theory of Eminence’, defines his use of the term ‘self’ in the following manner:

⁵⁴ John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. xiv.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁶ Weisberg, *Genius and Other Myths*, p. 133.

At different times (more often than not) the self being most referred to in this model is the individual's identity and image of him or herself as they function within a definable social environment (e.g. as a son, a student, a leader, a father, etc.).⁵⁷

Here, as is so often the case in such studies, the scholar dutifully refers to creators as 'he and she' (or, in this case, 'himself' or 'herself') only to then, in an indirect manner, shift his focus mainly onto men ('father' and 'son').

Another illustrative case of this lasting gendering within creativity literature may be drawn from the rather surprising source of Margaret Boden's previously referred to *The Creative Mind* which starts with a list of outstanding creators: 'Shakespeare, Bach, Picasso, Newton, Darwin, Babbage; Chanel, the Saatchis, Groucho Marx, the Beatles...take your pick. From poets and scientists to advertisers and fashion designers, creativity abounds.'⁵⁸ Although Boden appears to deconstruct a traditional 'genius' clinging to high arts only (she, for instance, mentions the Beatles as artists of popular music), she nonetheless provides an indirect presentation of creativity 'abounding' – Chanel is the only woman in the midst of nine individual or groups of men – primarily among men.

Again, this is by no means to say that there has been any conscious intention of sexism and discrimination against female creators on behalf of these scholars. On the contrary, what we are arguably facing here is merely the way the myth of genius works. Having helped to create some received notions on who is considered outstandingly creative and who is not, it manages to perpetuate itself to the extent that even artists no longer conceived of in traditional terms of the

⁵⁷ Albert, 'A Developmental Theory of Eminence', in *Genius and Eminence*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Boden, *The Creative Mind*, p. 1.

genius view still tend to inherit the myth's concept of their almost necessarily masculine body.

Interestingly – and although strikingly unheeded by other investigative fields – the previously mentioned areas of feminist literary studies and feminist aesthetics have actually long provided an impressive body of research which should have helped to throw over creativity studies' lasting assumption that (eminent) creators tend to be male.

Within the vast field of the former one can, among the many works relevant to this thesis, generally distinguish between two types of investigations. Firstly, there is a considerable number of works dedicated to outlining and analysing the countless obstacles which have been placed in the path of female creators, among which Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*,⁵⁹ Dale Spender's *The Writing or the Sex – Or Why You Don't Have to Read Women's Writing to Know It's No Good*⁶⁰ and Tillie Olson's *Silences* may act as some of the most famous examples.

The latter also contains a detailed list of 'lost' female writers, which leads us to the second, dominant tendency: Namely an interest in showing that, without disregarding the seriousness of these obstacles, women have in fact always written and often with great critical and popular success. Among the many studies recovering women writers so often erased from the literary canon, one may mention Elaine Showalter's pioneering *A Literature of Their Own - From*

⁵⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford, New York: World Classics, 1992, c1929).

⁶⁰ Dale Spender, *The Writing Or the Sex – Or Why You Don't Have to Read Women's Writing to Know It's No Good* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989).

Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing,⁶¹ Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel - 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen*⁶² and *Women of Ideas - And What Men Have Done to Them*⁶³ or – going historically even further into the development of early English writing – Jane Stevenson's *Women Writers in English Literature*.⁶⁴ All of these works provide striking challenges to the narrative moral of female inferiority as contained by the charter myth of genius.

Still, many of these studies – often to the detriment of their intentions – also seem unable let go of some of the basic assumptions of the genius myth altogether. As such, Tillie Olson, although herself a mother of four, states in her work *Silences* that 'Almost no mothers – as almost no part-time, part-self persons – have created enduring literature...so far',⁶⁵ thus arguably perpetuating the traditional belief (to be analysed) that motherhood and literary activity tend to be antagonistic entities. In a more drastic manner, Virginia Woolf swiftly dismisses the great number of prolific, early female writers – so crucial a counter-argument to the genius view – by adopting the traditional bias that they have been dropped from the canon because they lacked literary quality:

Hundreds of women began as the eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making

⁶¹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own – From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 2003, c1977).

⁶² Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel - 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora, 1986).

⁶³ Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them from Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1983, c1982).

⁶⁴ Jane Stevenson, *Women Writers in English Literature* (Harlow: Longman York, 1993).

⁶⁵ Olson, *Silences*, p. 19. This is a fascinatingly false assumption of the genius view, to be discussed in more detail later on. In the perfectly cyclical conception of the genius as male, the few female 'geniuses' admitted by the canon – such as George Eliot, Virginia Woolf or Jane Austen – have been without children, that is, in genius terms, 'estranged' from the feminine mythical counterpart of the 'mother'. Nonetheless, there have been countless historical (let alone present, such as Olson herself) important woman writers with children such as Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney, Margaret Oliphant, among many more.

translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even in text-books.⁶⁶

What we come to realise, then, is that even within the field of feminist literary studies, an endorsement of some basic genius notions and their implicit function against women has often remained unquestioned.

As implied, this problem has begun to be addressed by other related areas previously mentioned, especially that of feminist aesthetics. Within it, the philosopher Christine Battersby in her work *Gender and Genius - Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* directly points to the masculine nature of the genius idea and the possible dangers of adopting it, unquestioned, for any feminist discourse. In this, she has been followed – for instance – by the previously mentioned Carolyn Korsmeyer, who in discussions such as ‘Feminist Aesthetics’ and *Gender and Aesthetics* reveals the implicitly sexual coding of artistic genres and – as we shall see – a reliance on age-old dichotomies of male vs. female features to deepen the supposedly masculine nature of genius.

Now, even though works from both feminist areas of research make several crucial allusions to the discouraging effects discriminative practices have had on women writers, what is virtually absent from them is a systematic and detailed analysis of what precisely these effects might be, especially with regard to the creative process itself. Also, they tend to show little concern for the intensely circular relationship between specific theories on creativity and actual artistic practices and evaluations.

⁶⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 84.

The field of creativity studies has naturally been more dedicated to systematic analyses of what does and does not further the creative process. Still, it is significant to point out that this area shows almost no awareness of the workings of genius as an actual myth and its influence on artists despite its untruth. Of course, a vast number of relevant studies do include the word ‘myth’ in their title, such as – to allude only to those already mentioned – Gladwell’s ‘The Talent **Myth**’ and both Weisberg’s *Creativity - Genius and Other **Myths*** and *Creativity - Beyond the **Myth** of Genius*. Also, both Weisberg and Boden go so far as to respectively recognise genius and our general romantic heritage as ‘really more like myths, stories not based on fact which attempt to explain some natural phenomena’⁶⁷ and ‘myths: imaginative constructions, whose function is to express the values, assuage the fears and endorse the practices of the community that celebrates them.’⁶⁸ Nevertheless, none of these investigations go on to take this notion any further, discussing the vast implications which such a mythical nature might have on the operations and evaluations of creativity and the perpetuation of the genius view itself.

To fill this gap, it has therefore been necessary to draw from the basic insights of myth studies itself. There – apart from relying on Bronislaw Malinowski’s charter myth theory – other complementary studies such as Mircea Eliade’s detailed outlines of the nature of myth in *Myth and Reality* and *The Sacred and The Profane*,⁶⁹ as well as John Teske’s ‘Neuromythology - Brains and Stories’⁷⁰ came to be of crucial importance.

⁶⁷ Weisberg, *Genius and Other Myths*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Boden, *The Creative Mind*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane – The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

⁷⁰ John A. Teske, ‘Neuromythology - Brains and Stories’, *Zygon*, 41.1 (March 2006), pp. 169-196.

Furthermore it has been vital to recur to two very different yet highly significant investigations on the direct effect of (untrue) self-beliefs on the creative process. These are the previously alluded to cognitive approach by Albert Bandura, with his ground-breaking theory of self-efficacy, and the psychoanalytical discussion of Peter Wolson in his ‘The Vital Role of Adaptive Grandiosity in Artistic Creativity.’ All of these works and more – which are to receive their due attention later on – have crucially added up, despite and often because of some of their limitations, to the present analysis of genius as a gendered charter myth.

Finally, it is important to stress that – although extensive research has been conducted on several, separate aspects of this discussion – there is of course no pre-existing study approaching the notion of genius as a functional charter myth. This thesis thus aims to be an original contribution due to its combination of hitherto virtually separate fields, as well as its dedication to showing that, far from being an exotic element of so-called ‘primitive societies’, myths are alive and active in our present (art) world. Moreover, the present research may be regarded as particularly innovative in its emphasis not only on the significant relationship between creative theory and practice but also on how – ideologically informed – beliefs and interventions tend to mutually affect each other, both inwardly within the recess of writers’ minds and outwardly within the complex operations of the literary system.

To complete an outline of such a view, however, it has been necessary to create a new motivational model of the creative process and draw in the voices and comments of many creative practitioners and writers themselves; and these are matters we shall turn to in the next section.

1.6. The Writers' View: The Interviews

Throughout this thesis, reference will be made to a great many observations by historical or contemporary writers, as recorded in their diaries, their musing about writing or during interviews. To complement these, I have conducted a total of twenty-one interviews, three as detailed case studies and eighteen for an overall analysis of the effect of genius on the creative process.

The reasons for this addition are numerous. To begin with, as this research intends to maintain an interconnected balance between the workings of genius historically and today, these conversations were regarded as a crucial source of insights about truly contemporary writers. At the same time, the thesis' focus naturally raised some highly specific questions, whose answers could not be sought in pre-existing documents only, often making it necessary to connect on a very personal level to the beliefs and feelings of (aspiring) authors.

Ultimately, however, the interviews became necessary through the very decision to take the notion of writing as a motivational process to its most evident conclusions. For if – as will be outlined – it is the wish to write rather than some mysterious innate capacity which acts as one of the basic requirement for literary activity, then it is of crucial importance to look at the way a myriad of internal and external factors can contribute to the fulfilment of this desire, as well as to severe struggles potentially leading to its abandonment. Therefore, whereas there is a considerable tendency in creativity literature and studies of writers to look at published and publically acclaimed writers only,⁷¹ I have included so far

⁷¹ Even though there are exceptions to this, such as the subsequently mentioned creativity theorist Teresa Amabile (who often draws her conclusions from experiments with non-expert student groups), the common tendency is to 'explain' the outstanding achievements of officially sanctioned writers, as in Howe's analyses of the Brontës' and Dickens' creative abilities in his previously referred to *Genius Explained*.

unpublished authors as well as those who manifest a strong urge to write but have been severely blocked.

Towards the end of the previous section, I have mentioned that, in order to thoroughly investigate the matters at hand, it has also been necessary to create a new structural approach to the creativity process which will be referred to as the Three Stages Model of Creativity.⁷² Given that this model has been crucial for the choice of interviewees, let us briefly glance at what it comprises. On the whole, it is – as the name implies – divided into three profoundly interconnected parts, each with its own subdivision:

Stage One:

Volition: The desire and motivation to write.

Permission: Creating suitable circumstances and allowing oneself to write.

Stage Two:

Execution: Developing ideas and writing a draft.

Revision: Revisiting and improving one's writing.

Stage Three:

Release: Exposing one's work to the literary system.

⁷² Of course, creativity studies has produced a considerable number of such models, among which Graham Wallas' notion of creators passing through the stages of Preparation, Incubation, Illumination and Verification is perhaps the most famous (see Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1926)). Despite the evident value of this model, however, it has – as other such systems available – been regarded as unsuitable for the present purpose. This is above all due to the fact that it appears to focus on the occurrence of one chief creative idea, whereas the novel is a genre which requires a virtual infinity of ideas (from plot structure, characters, to the specific phrasing of a sentence, for instance). In fact, the greatest challenge, even if one were to talk about a core idea at a novel's centre, does not seem to lie so much in a process of verification as in its lengthy phase of execution.

Reception: The outward reactions to one's work.

This model will be discussed in far more detail and relied on for subsequent outlines of the inward effects of genius on each stage. For the moment suffice it to say that whereas the stages can be regarded as applying to a specific project's development from ideation to completion, they are also directly useful for the analysis of a writer's career. In this manner, published writers may be viewed as those who have successfully negotiated all three stages; so far unpublished yet active writers can be placed into stage two; and the 'blocked' writers previously often seem to have difficulties moving beyond stage one.

Departing from this assumption, then, I have interviewed one woman from each stage as a detailed case study and a total of six writers from each level of creative development, with a 50:50 gender ratio (even though, given the specific focus of this thesis, more attention will be given to the female writers questioned). As has also been implied, only writers from stage three have been chosen on the basis of their creative achievements in a more traditional sense, such as the publications of novels, winning of literary prizes and overall positive critical feedback. The criterion for writers of level two was simply (or not so simply, as it turned out) their involvement in a production of a considerable body of work in novel writing, finished or unfinished, but not yet successfully presented to publishers. Finally, the defining feature of writers belonging to level one was above all their (once) strong desire to write, alongside a noteworthy lack of actual engagement in this creative activity.

To provide a sense of the wide-spread impact of the genius myth within the Western world, (aspiring) writers from countries other than England – such

as Austria and Italy – were also included among the interviewees. In addition, a double mode of interviews was adopted. One third of the interviews were conducted in a traditional person-to-person style; the other via ‘chat’ programmes such as those offered by the internet servers gmail or skype.

This combination proved to be very fruitful. Whereas the person-to-person interviews sometimes allowed one to explore arising details in a more intimate manner, the chat conversations, by evidently being conducted in writing, capitalised on the individuals’ overall ease with the written word, which meant that – in some cases – more elaborate and uninhibited answers arose. The latter might have also been related to the physical distance between interviewer and interviewee which often seemed to enhance the (aspiring) authors’ openness.

As to the particular insights sought by these qualitative interviews, these were, at a first instance, whether the interviewees showed an overall, partial or contradictory⁷³ adoption of the notion of genius and related aspects such as a belief in vocation, muses etc.. Then, with regard to this endorsement of genius or other writing ideologies (such as the ‘Writer’s Dream of Wealth’ to be mentioned later on), the possible helps and hindrances of creators’ beliefs on their actual (non) writing was probed into. Thus relying on the notion so central to this thesis as a whole – that, albeit in an often complex manner, beliefs lead to actions and create realities at hand – the chief aim was to test authors’ ideas about writing, the effects these had on the creative process itself, as well as the particular role notions of genius played with regard to this.

⁷³ As has been implied and will be discussed in more detail, the concept of genius, because of its inherently mythical nature, is often endorsed in a highly contradictory manner, where a firm rejection of the genius ideology can go hand in hand with its indirect, partial, endorsement.

In order to seek this information, an adapted version of the long interview methodology as outlined in Grant McCracken's *The Long Interview*⁷⁴ was deployed. The latter was chosen primarily because of being a qualitative interview form above all 'concerned with cultural categories and shared meanings rather than individual affective states'⁷⁵ and a general 'understanding of how culture mediates human action.'⁷⁶ Thus, it proved particularly relevant for the present interest in the 'cultural category' of the genius myth and how its endorsement (or lack thereof) mediated the actions of writers.

Furthermore, it is a methodology recommended for investigations into the researcher's own culture, where it is by 'drawing on their understanding of how they themselves see and experience the world' that the interviewer 'can supplement and interpret the data they generate in the long interview.'⁷⁷ This, again, was considered highly suitable for a study the aim of which is to analyse the function of myth in our own Western world and not – as has been so commonly done by classic myth scholars – within an alien, supposedly 'primitive' culture.

This shared cultural heritage is regarded by McCracken as granting a particular form of 'access' between interviewer and interviewee, both during the questioning itself and the subsequent stage of analysis.⁷⁸ However, there are clearly also investigational risks involved in such an approach, above all the possible lack of distance towards the assumptions of one's own culture. Partly in order to minimise this risk, yet also to heighten the focus and efficacy of the

⁷⁴ Grant McCracken *The Long Interview* (London: Sage, 1988).

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.12.

⁷⁸ As he states: 'The purpose of the qualitative interview is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world.' Ibid., p. 17.

interviews conducted, this methodology emphasises the interviewer's use of a questionnaire to structure the interview process. With this aid, the interviews are then conducted over several stages, each followed by a phase of analysis, during which the questionnaire and interview process is refined for the next set of interviewees. Following this, the present investigation made heavy use of such an overall questionnaire (see appendix) which was slightly modified for the three cycles of six and the fourth cycle of three interviews carried out.

Whereas all these previous aspects of the methodology were thus adhered to directly, some adaptations of the long interview method also proved to be essential to the specific purpose of this research. With regard to this, the partial usage of chat operators as opposed to McCracken's recommendation of person-to-person interviews has already been mentioned.⁷⁹ Also, even though the long interview method usually supposes no personal connection between interviewer and interviewee, this proved impracticable especially with aspiring but blocked writers, wherefore – in some cases – some previous contact had been established. Indeed, as talking about writing can often be a highly intimate matter, a basic pre-existence of trust appeared to contribute very positively to more uninhibited responses by (aspiring) writers, especially where their highly tenuous existence as authors not yet 'sanctified' by success was concerned.

Then, given the often subliminal workings of the genius myth, more emphasis than originally found in the long interview method had to be placed on discovering subconscious elements of the interviewees' genius adoption and application. In this manner, particular attention was paid to their specific usage of words which, for instance, frequently revealed a subtle gendering that seemed to

⁷⁹ This new method also seemed to decrease the very risk of excessive 'closeness' previously implied, by manufacturing a heightened distance between interviewer and interviewee.

go beyond any conscious endorsement.⁸⁰ With regard to the six person-to-person conversations held, interviewees' beliefs were further probed into through a method adapted from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*,⁸¹ where the theatre practitioner describes the photographing of abstract phenomena (such as 'oppression') to reveal an individual's personal imagination of and relationship with a term. In this case, interviewees were asked to produce rough sketches of their associations with the word 'genius' as well as with reference to what helped and hindered their writing. This turned out to be very helpful in revealing their subconscious coding of these phenomena.

These interviews have hence been conducted to significantly complement the research available and follow a motivational and dynamic model of creativity to its direct conclusions. Now, having outlined this crucial addition to the present argument, it is time to turn towards some potential objections against it.

1.7. And yet...Some possible objection

All alone?

To begin with, one may perhaps wonder whether it is possible – or, for that matter, presently asserted – that the notion of genius has worked such a detrimental effect on women writers all by itself. One cannot quite overemphasise that none such claims of geniuses' vast and virtually autonomous operations are being made. On the contrary, one needs to always bear in mind the previously mentioned fact the myth operates in direct conjunction with a patriarchal system of culture, at large. In this manner, it will be argued that the

⁸⁰ Incidentally, this aspect was helped by the non-English speaking interviewees added. As will be illustrated through the case study of an Austrian stage two author, the German distinction between a specifically male and female term for 'writer', for instance, helped to reveal the subconscious maleness of an idealised author figure the young woman was trying to emulate.

⁸¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto, 1998, c1974), pp. 122-125.

idea of genius has directly contributed to the discrimination against female creators, while at the same time acting as a kind of symbolical encoding and ‘chartering’ of discriminations inherent in patriarchy. Also, it is once again crucial to bear in mind that charter myths tend to be ‘made *ad hoc* to fulfil a certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status’⁸², thus responding to a pre-existent socio-cultural hierarchy which they in turn help to further establish and enhance.

A conspiracy by all men?

Another related question that may arise is whether this thesis might imply the existence of a conscious conspiracy on behalf of all men, against all women (writers). Once again this is far from being the case. Indeed, one could only speak of such a phenomenon if the myth of genius were always knowingly deployed to ‘keep women down’. Yet, although there are cases where it appears to be deliberately called upon to use its narrative moral against women,⁸³ it seems (as has already been indicated) that in our own day and age of political correctness and awareness, it is often endorsed and perpetuated without the slightest, intentional harm.

This might be further illustrated through a personal example: As will be highlighted in the conclusion to this thesis, the myth of genius has above all been concerned with the celebration of the proverbial white, upper-middle class, European male. Therefore, it has arguably caused difficulties for all those who do not confirm to this image, including different social classes and races. Many black women writers and theorists have, for instance, pointed towards a double

⁸² See previous footnote, Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, p. 58.

⁸³ The *Daily Mail* article ‘Only Men Can Be Geniuses...But There Are Far More Stupid Men Than Women’ to be mentioned in a moment may act as an example of this.

discrimination at work against them – and that many white feminists have passed over this problem entirely unawares. Still, until confronted with these just outcries⁸⁴ during my research, I myself – as a white woman – had not once realised that black women writers were all but absent from crucial works recovering lost female writers such as Elaine Showalter's⁸⁵ mentioned earlier on.

What this once again goes to show, then, is that the ideology of genius and its specific functions of disqualifications, erasure and discouragement are able to work unnoticed, without the consent and even despite the best intentions of those ultimately helping to perpetuate it. In fact, I believe the myth has been perpetuated precisely because it simply presents itself as conceived knowledge not to be questioned every step of the way. What is more, it appears to have been incorporated into this body of knowledge above all because it somehow 'feels' right to an overall patriarchal society whose faith in the superiority of men and inferiority of women has been – even prior to the formation of the genius idea – a long established, philosophical tradition.⁸⁶

With regard to the question whether it is deployed by all men, and – in direct relation – whether all men benefit from it, this is also far from being claimed. In the specific case of writers, there have certainly been individual women – historically and to the present – far more privileged for a pursuit of

⁸⁴ See, for instance Alice Walker, 'One Child of One's Own - A Meaningful Digression Within the Work(s)', in Janet Sternburg (ed.), *The Writer on Her Work - Seventeen Essays By Twentieth-Century American Writers* (2nd edn, London, New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

⁸⁵ This lack of attention to black women writers, one may note, is no longer a feature of Elaine Showalter's work. Her recent *A Jury of Her Peers - American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, for instance, also pays considerable attention to women writers of colour in its outline of a specifically female tradition in American literature. See Elaine Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers - American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (London: Virago, 2009).

⁸⁶ Indeed, the belief in the inherent inferiority of women is by no means a new idea. As Aristotle already so influentially theorised: 'the male is by nature superior and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; the principle of necessity extends to all mankind.' Aristotle, quoted in Jack Holland *Misogyny - The World's Oldest Prejudice* (London: Robinson, 2006), p. 33.

writing than individual men. In effect, it is important to already point to the factor that, albeit working symbolically to signify all males, the myth of genius is – paradoxically – also a concept which celebrates only a few chosen and special men. As a result, it can potentially work for the benefit as well as detriment (e.g. if a man does not regard himself as conforming to the kind of protagonist the myth will be shown to prescribe) of individual, male creators.

However, as gender theorist Kimmel so eloquently puts it in his work *The Gendered Society* with special reference to Hannah Arendt's analyses of the phenomenon of power: 'Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group...When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name.'⁸⁷ In this way, then, the figure of the 'genius' can be seen as an individual man empowered to act in the name of *mankind* as a whole.

Therefore, one may once more stress that this thesis does not rely on a notion of a ubiquitous conspiracy. Rather, genius can be regarded as a particularly powerful cultural narrative⁸⁸ which – with its subtle male gendering – both informs and is formed by social traditions, hierarchies and beliefs which mutually re-enforce each other to form an on-going, masculine circle negatively affecting women as a collective, while collectively raising the status of men.

⁸⁷ Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, p. 101.

⁸⁸ Although this is a discussion which goes beyond the scope of the present research, there are in fact many elements of the genius myth which, arguably, give it the distinct flavour of a masculine fantasy. As such, man not only acts as a phenomenal hero in an exciting tale but also, on a deeper level, becomes a godlike creator who dispenses with the necessity of women to bring his ideational 'off-spring' into the world.

Why genius and gender still?

A third and – for the moment final – objection I would like to discuss is whether questions of genius and gender equality might not, at our present day and age, be regarded as somewhat outdated.

Starting with the potential anachronism of studying gender discrimination within the literary field, such a notion might be strengthened by a simple glance at bestseller lists, where the presence of phenomenally successful authors such as J.K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer or Sophie Kinsella could be taken as a sign for the vastly increased power and presence of women writers in our day.

However, it would be crucially wrong to jump from this evidence to the conclusion that patriarchal patterns in literature have been all but toppled over and gender equality reigns supreme.⁸⁹ On the contrary, when looked at from a global perspective, it is, for instance, important to note that a full two thirds of the world's illiterate are women⁹⁰ (and being able to write may evidently be regarded as the most basic pre-requisite for becoming an author), or that women trying to express themselves through the written medium still regularly face such concrete threats as censorship⁹¹ or sexual harassment by the literary establishment.⁹²

⁸⁹ As Paul Delany seems to do in his work *Literature, Money and the Market – from Trollope to Amis*, where he claims: 'Today, writing is probably the only economic sector where women have achieved parity: in 1997, of the eight richest authors in the U.K., four were women. J.K. is now the highest paid woman in England, with an income around (pound) 40 million a year, and also the world's most successful author.' Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market*, pp. 103-4.

⁹⁰ 'The World Factbook: Literacy', *Central Intelligence Agency*, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed April 2010.

⁹¹ Unfortunately, there are countless examples for this. To name only one, the autobiography *Ama Meyebela* ('My Bengali Girlhood') by the Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin, was – as Menun Rita explains in her work 'The Structured Silences of Women' - 'banned almost immediately by the government.' Rita Menun, 'The Structured Silences of Women - Culture, Censorship, and Voice in a Globalised Market', in Jocelyn Burrell (ed), *Word, On Being a [Woman] Writer* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), p. 5.

⁹² In her previously mentioned work, Rita Menun also talks about her experience of giving writing workshops to Indian women and how: 'the women in our workshops, representing ten

But even when one moves to our own literary world – considering that these highly explicit forms of discrimination often take place outside of the West – one notices that equal rights for and representation of women writers are still very far from being achieved. This becomes particularly evident when focusing on the genre of ‘serious’ literature so closely associated with the genius myth and which, as the most highly regarded, tends to set the standard for all others.⁹³ In fact, it almost seems as though the image of the ‘serious writer’ as such a close conceptual relative to the genius myth gains cultural impact especially during times when women are most powerfully staking their literary claims, helping to regulate their continued access only as an exceptional minority among a clear majority of men.

Parting thus from a deliberately naïve insistence that ‘equality’ should take the form of (roughly) equal presence of men and women within this section of the literary field,⁹⁴ these are some examples of the reality of female representation one finds. First of all, when quickly scanning some innovative versions of the literary canon as those created by popular ‘best novels ever’ lists, one discovers that, whilst an all European dominance appears to have been broken, the necessary maleness of most genius writers has clearly been

major literary languages, spoke about their marginalisation in the literary establishment, about male patronage, sexual harassment by editors of powerful periodicals and papers, and about the oldest form of informal censorship we know – simply ignoring the writer’s work.’ Ibid., p. 10.

⁹³ This well-known fact is discussed with an innovative reference to ‘taste cultures’ by the theorist Dag Björkegren in his work *The Culture Business - Management Strategies for the Arts-Related Business*, where he claims: ‘High culture [of which serious literature evidently forms a part] is the smallest of the taste cultures but also the one that receives most attention in the media; it is also the culture that is often used as a yardstick in evaluating all the other taste cultures.’ Dag Björkegren, *The Culture Business - Management Strategies for the Arts-Related Business* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 14.

⁹⁴ In fact, considering the masses of important female literature that have been rediscovered from over the centuries (as further discussed in Chapter Three) one might suppose that the literary canon could have absorbed a considerable number of these into its ranks.

preserved. In a listing of ‘The Top 100 Books’, *The Telegraph*, for example,⁹⁵ mentions no more than twenty three books by women (including *four* appearances of Jane Austen), which is just a little more than twenty per cent. Even more crudely, ‘The Top 100 Books of All Time’ published by *The Guardian*,⁹⁶ although naming writers from a total of fifty four countries, only includes ten women writers – a meagre ten per cent – in its celebration of literary eminences.

Similarly, when assessing the author lists of prestigious publishing houses, one discovers that women are also far from equally represented among their elevated ranks. A counting of male vs. female writers printed by Britain’s eminent publishing house Penguin reveals just over 700 women, as compared to more than 1850 men – considerably less than 30 per cent.⁹⁷ The high-status editor of works in German, Diogenes, on the other hand, publishes a mere forty eight females among its total of 225 authors – again just a little more than twenty per cent.⁹⁸

This list of unequal representation may be almost endlessly continued. The 1991 all-male Booker prize short-list – which led to the establishment of the all-female *Orange Prize for Fiction*⁹⁹ – is another famous case in point. Yet even

⁹⁵ ‘The Top 100 Books’, *The Telegraph*, 2 April 2008 [consulted at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1544033/The-top-100-books.html>> accessed May 2010)].

⁹⁶ ‘The Top 100 Books of All Time’, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2002 [consulted at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/may/08/books.booksnews>> (accessed March 2010)].

⁹⁷ This information has been gained by counting authors on www.penguin.co.uk. Rounded numbers have been given due to the fact that numbers are likely to be in constant flux and are complicated by not infrequent co-authorships and occasional errors such as double listings within this otherwise highly illuminating source. See ‘Penguin Authors, A-Z’, *Penguin Publishing*, <<http://www.penguin.co.uk/static/cs/uk/0/penguinauthors/index.html>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed April 2010.

⁹⁸ See ‘Unsere Autoren,’ in Diogenes Katalog – Gesamtverzeichnis 2009 (Zürich: Diogenes Verlag, 2009).

⁹⁹ Kate Mosse, ‘Girls Aloud’, in *Msllexia*, 36 (January/February/March 2008), pp. 9-13.

the Nobel Prize for Literature which ‘seems’¹⁰⁰ to have been won by so many women writers recently, was actually awarded to three women as opposed to seven men during each of the previous two decades.¹⁰¹ The striking impression that therefore arises is that, even in our third millennium, the vast majority of acknowledged ‘serious’ writers continue to be male.

Yet, even given the fact that gender equality in literature is far from having been achieved, what about the concept of genius? Has not the latter, at least, been succeeded by other, cultural beliefs?

Of course, such an assumption might well be supported by the fact that, as has been mentioned, virtually all notions associated with the genius ideology (such as innate talent or the existence of inherent and universal values) have already been revealed to be socially constructed. Nevertheless, once again, as soon as one looks at the matter in more detail, one notices that a belief in a ‘present world without genius’ might be seen as at least as fictitious as the romantic myth itself.

What seems to have happened, however, is that given such vast cultural outcries against the concept of genius, its importance nowadays tends to manifest itself in two different ways. Firstly, and perhaps indeed somewhat anachronistically, there still seems to be a more or less direct clinging to the genius view, *regardless* of all the evidence brought forth against it. Among the virtually endless examples of this, one may refer to fairly recent and prominent publications such as Howard Bloom’s *Genius – A Mosaic of One Hundred*

¹⁰⁰ One may add that the status of female authors as a conceptual ‘other’ becomes further highlighted by the frequent yet false notion that women have by now reached parity with regard to this coveted prize, their rare presence being disproportionately conspicuous.

¹⁰¹ When looking at the prize winners from 1991 – 2000 and from 2000 – 2010, this ratio of female representation is repeated each time. See ‘Nobel Prize in Literature – All Nobel Laureates in Literature’, *Nobelprize.org*, <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed December 2010.

Exceptional Minds,¹⁰² *The Observer Book of Genius*, or a near infinity of media contributions structured around the genius idea, as *The Guardian*'s 'Leo Tolstoy - The Forgotten Genius',¹⁰³ or *The Independent*'s 'You Don't Have to Be Bipolar to Be a Genius – But It Helps',¹⁰⁴ among many, many more.

In fact, a *Daily Mail* article entitled 'Only Men Can Be Geniuses...But There Are Far More Stupid Men than Women',¹⁰⁵ may act as a particularly striking example of our culture's continuing clinging to traditional views on genius – and gender. The latter, based on 'recent findings' at the University of Edinburgh, not only displays the associated idea that token female creators are, necessarily, rather 'freakish'.¹⁰⁶ It also claims, presenting itself as a heroic voice of truth in the midst of misleading political correctness,¹⁰⁷ that women 'have had their chance to excel, and in spite of well-meaning people everywhere trying to give them the chance, the female Rutherford, the female Shakespeare and the

¹⁰² Howard Bloom, *Genius – A Mosaic of One Hundred Exceptional Minds* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

¹⁰³ Luke Harding, 'Leo Tolstoy: The Forgotten Genius', *The Guardian*, 6 January 2010 [consulted at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jan/06/leo-tolstoy-the-last-station>>, (accessed March 2010)].

¹⁰⁴ Jeremy Laurance, 'You Don't Have to Be Bipolar to Be a Genius – But It Helps', *The Independent*, 3 February 2010 [consulted at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/you-dont-have-to-be-bipolar-to-be-a-genius-ndash-but-it-helps-1887646.html>> (accessed April 2010)].

¹⁰⁵ The reference to men being both the most intelligent and the most stupid is, naturally, a very interesting one. Within the context of this thesis, it can be interpreted as being part of an overall 'levelling-off' function of the genius myth, which seems to be a complex method of warding off envy and retaining its representative status. In general, this can be found in the geniuses intrinsically 'flawed' nature, wherefore it should not be envied by the less talented every-man. Here it seems that the claim to men's superiority and inferiority (thus letting women occupy the 'middle ground') works to a similar effect.

¹⁰⁶ 'Dame Ethel Smyth, a slightly risible [sic] old lesbian, wrote some symphonies, but there is no symphonic music by women to match the sublime works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Shostakovich.' A.N. Wilson, 'Only Men Can Be Geniuses...But There Are Far More Stupid Men Than Women', *The Daily Mail*, 25 September 2007 [consulted at <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483707/Only-men-geniuses--far-stupid-men-women.html>> (accessed September 2010)].

¹⁰⁷ 'He [the researcher Timothy Bates] is a brave man...Saying such a thing in the United States is a thoughtcrime, guaranteed to bring down upon the head of anyone brave enough to state the obvious a torrent of irrational abuse.' Id.

female Richard Wagner have simply not appeared.’¹⁰⁸ The conclusion that is drawn from this is rather unsurprising and clear. Much in the spirit of turn-of-the-century theorist Otto Weininger quoted earlier on, the moral of the tale is that ‘the quality which we call genius would appear, by some ineluctable fact of nature, to be a male quality.’¹⁰⁹

If this and many other examples to be presented throughout this discussion represent a lasting, direct adoption of traditional (gendered) genius views in our society, one may still not disregard a new, in some ways more complex and fascinating form of endorsement. This is a kind of ideological pick’n’mix approach, which allows for the deconstruction of genius and some of its basic assumptions to ambiguously and at times downright paradoxically co-exist.

The previous quoted case of Weisberg argumentatively destroying the word genius, only to then refer to Bach’s ‘genius’ himself, or the feminists Woolf and Olson fighting against a male genius dominance while indirectly endorsing some of its potentially sexist ideas, may act as cases in point.

Notably, such an ambiguous adoption was also a common feature among several interviewees and may be found as lying at the heart of a continuing key promoter of the genius myth – narratives. In effect, the prominence of the genius myth nowadays seems particularly striking within the medium of film, where countless blockbusters such as *Shakespeare in Love*, *Immortal Beloved* (about Beethoven) or *Amadeus* (based on Peter Shaffer’s play about Mozart with the same name) pay homage to its lasting importance. This latter can, of course, be seen as the ideal manner in which the cultural deconstruction of genius and its

¹⁰⁸ Id.

¹⁰⁹ Id.

continuing allure can be harmonised. For, as stories, these films never make any claims that the myth they celebrate is in any way literally true.

Therefore, one seems to be facing the intriguing phenomenon that in our own, supposedly hyper-rational, hyper-scientific age, the romantic figure of the mythical creator continues to be of lasting prominence and appeal.

1.8. Outlining genius: The structure in brief

The main body of this thesis is divided into two parts. The first, ‘In-Genius Circles’, is concerned with providing insights into the conceptual basis for the gendered charter function of genius, as well as a delineation of the outward discriminative practices against women. In this manner, Chapter Two aims to substantiate the claim that genius can be regarded as a ‘myth’, with reference both to its inherent untruth and its existence as a pattern for a mythical tale. Furthermore, this chapter will illustrate the way in which the mythical nature of genius naturally – and significantly – contributes to its operations as a gendered charter myth.

Following on from this, Chapter Three will illustrate both the profoundly masculine gendering of the genius protagonist and plot structure, and discuss the hypothesis that the ideology emerged in part as a way of creating new ideological boundaries to push women back after their ‘invasion’ of the literary field during the rise of the novel. Chapter Four will then move onto the closely related issue of the outward effects of the gendered myth, analysing how the genius idea has actively contributed – historically and to this day – to an overall bias in the reception of women’s work, imposing itself on literary judgments and thus continuing discrimination against women writers in a cyclical manner.

Whereas the outward discrimination against female authors has already achieved a considerable amount of scholarly attention and will therefore be looked at more briefly, the second part, 'A Circle Within', will turn towards the original core of this thesis and investigate the complex inward effects of the romantic ideology on female writers. Thus, Chapter Five will analyse how the extent and quality of an artist's identification with the genius protagonist can have both an enhancing and profoundly destructive effect on creation, the latter – given the myth's gendering – being far more commonly found among women. To round this off, this section will also present some basic findings from the interviews and the three case studies which manifest how individual female writers interacted with and are affected by the genius myth.

Chapter Six will then attempt to add depth and width to the previous analysis, by outlining more detailed and specific effects of the genius myth on all stages of the creative process. It will put these into a wider frame of testimonials both from this thesis' interviewees and a vast variety of internationally acknowledged writers. Finally, Chapter Seven will present some overall conclusions of the present investigation, as well as discuss important implications, possible limitations and ideas for future research.

It is in this manner, then, that this thesis intends to show how the culturally highly persistent notion of the 'genius' has indeed functioned like a Malinowskian charter myth, working within an overall patriarchal system to further establish, emphasise and perpetuate the general bias of artistic male superiority in an almost unbreakable, masculine circle.

In fact, given this complicated phenomenon, one begins to suspect that – within the literary field and the arts as a whole – the myth has not only worked to

establish the presumed superiority of the male creator but also to control the information that flows, through literature, into the world. It seems to have helped ensure that highly valued cultural contributions have been oriented towards a male point of view,¹¹⁰ organising perceptions of the world according to the position, opinions and needs of men.

¹¹⁰ Interestingly, the feminist writer and critic Joanna Russ considers the socio-cultural dominance of a male point of view as one of the defining essences of a patriarchal system. As she explains: 'the society we live in is a patriarchy. And patriarchies imagine or picture themselves from the male point of view.' Joanna Russ *To Write Like a Woman – Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 80-1.

PART ONE: IN-GENIUS CIRCLES

Chapter Two: Genius as a Myth

2.1. Introduction:

If the previous chapter has been concerned with outlining some of the basic principles of the present discussion, it is this chapter's key aim to provide some insight into the in some ways surprising suitability of the genius view for the cultural category of 'myth'. Also, it will illustrate how the mythical nature of genius naturally enables its charter operations, allowing it to emerge from a mere cluster of beliefs into an ideological system which – remarkably resilient to deconstructions – comes to influence actual operations within the art-world.

This analysis will be structured in the following manner. Section 2.2., 'What is a myth?', strives to amplify the definition of 'charter myth' as presented during the introduction by supplying a succinct overview of the more basic and utterly significant concept underlying it, namely that of 'myth' itself.¹¹¹ The subsequent part 2.3., 'Believed in but untrue', will then begin to apply these definitions to the notion of genius itself by first of all asking whether the latter can indeed be regarded as 'mythical' in the sense of being wide-spread yet essentially misrepresentative. In order to do so, it will momentarily divide the genius ideology into three separate if interrelated theories – the 'three Ps' of the creative person, process and product.

Following on from this, Section 2.4., 'A story?', will try to take this one step further by illustrating how the romantic concept can actually also be regarded as an archetypal pattern for numerous genius 'protagonists' and stories, whereas Section 2.5., 'A Mythical Tale', aims to dwell not only on the narrative,

¹¹¹Self-evidently and yet importantly given that a charter myth may be regarded as an actual subcategory of myth, the notion of genius can only be justly categorised as the former if it can be shown to fulfil some basic, conceptual requirements of the latter.

but also the profoundly ‘mythological’ nature of the genius story pattern. Finally, Section 2.6., ‘The importance of being mythical’, strives to analyse how the latter contributes to the genius idea’s remarkable cultural resilience and basically enables its charter myth function.

Throughout the present chapter, references will be made to the vast body of what may be called ‘genius literature’ – that is the manifold theoretical, fictional and autobiographical statements and works which have helped to develop and disperse the notion in its commonness and complexity. This measure has been taken not only to crucially demonstrate the mythical nature of genius, but also to provide further insight into the multiple shapes and shades of this belief in its countless (historical and present) manifestations, so crucial for this chapter and discussion as a whole.

2.2. What is a myth?

To understand this mythical essence of genius, then, we have to – albeit briefly – dive into a more detailed exploration of what is actually meant by the term ‘myth’. Drawing from a number of theories which help to enhance and complement Malinowski’s understanding of the concept, one may preliminarily emphasise that the notion is, of course, a complex and highly elusive one. As G.S. Kirk (a harmonising voice in a sea of contradictory theories¹¹²) states in his work *Myth – Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*: ‘There is

¹¹² As Kirk outlines in his work, the field of myth studies has produced a considerable number of ‘grand’ theories, all of which seem intent on providing a blue-print of the universal nature of myth and hence often clashing with each other. If I refer to the present scholar as harmonising, then, it is because he importantly grants the fact that some of these theories (including Malinowski’s charter myth notion itself) definitely hold true for some such significant cultural stories, yet are not applicable to them all. See G.S Kirk, *Myth – Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley L.A.: University of California Press and London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

no one definition of myth, no Platonic form of a myth against which all actual instances can be measured.’¹¹³

Nevertheless, when approaching myth in a general manner, one can identify some essential meanings which are particularly pertinent to our present purpose. Firstly, the word tends to be applied to beliefs which are commonly endorsed yet inherently untrue. Secondly, and more frequently with regard to ‘ancient’ or ‘exotic’ societies, it refers to an often strange story displaying a particular importance within a given culture. In this manner, myths are essentially narratives, relying (in the words of Kirk) ‘heavily on their narrative qualities for their creation and preservation.’¹¹⁴

These narratives, in turn, seem to contain a number of elements which distinguish them from ‘mere stories’ and enable them to assume the full psychosocial impact of myth. A number of voices from within the field of myth studies have attempted to pinpoint what precisely these may be. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, locates one of the differences between mere stories and myths in the fact that the latter act as common explanations for existing phenomena, significantly giving ‘man...the illusion that he can understand the universe.’¹¹⁵ In addition, Strauss conceives of myths as tales which come to narratively mediate between two contradictory life-forces, such as those of culture (in a sense approximating civilisation) and nature.¹¹⁶

According to the myth scholar Mircea Eliade, on the other hand, myth is a narrative phenomenon which essentially evolves around

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 254.

¹¹⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001, c1978), p. 12.

¹¹⁶ See overall argument in Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*.

a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to be...myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the World.¹¹⁷

In direct relation to this, Eliade also views the cosmogony of every culture as the very basis and origin of all subsequent cultural myths, for ‘the creation of the World being the pre-eminent instance of creation, the cosmogony becomes the exemplary model for ‘creation’ of every kind.’¹¹⁸

We have thus arrived at a definition of ‘myth’ as a belief which is commonly accepted yet untrue and a *story* containing crucial, mythological elements. These are, above all, myth’s explanatory power, its narrative mediation between contradictory forces, allusions to supernatural events, a preoccupation with ‘primordial times’, a basic concern with ‘creations’ of all kinds and hence also a strong connection to a culture’s cosmogony. In fact, when all of these aspects appear simultaneously, one may begin to conceive of myth as a declaration of some of a society’s most central – and often partly fictional – credos in narrative form.

¹¹⁷ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 5-6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

2.3. Believed in but untrue

After this overall outline of myth, let us turn to the question whether the notion of genius does actually fit this cultural category. Initially, then, we may simply pause to ask whether the romantic ideology is indeed ‘common yet untrue’. Now, as to the former – its commonness – the previous chapter has already granted a considerable amount of evidence pointing towards the lasting importance of the genius view. As to its possible untruth, this has also been hinted at with reference both to its specific history as a cultural *idea* and to crucial scholars engaged in its deconstruction, such as Weisberg, Howe or Gladwell. Still, it is only when we understand the magnitude of the myth’s false assumptions about creativity – the focus of the present section – that we can eventually understand the full harm it can cause the reception of works by female writers and women’s creative process.

Dividing creativity into three different yet interconnected ‘Ps’ – the creative person, process and product – this section will briefly discuss the common genius approach to these elements and provide some counter evidence against it. What will emerge is that whereas the genius ideology views creativity as a profoundly deterministic phenomenon, it is actually highly dynamic with reference to all aspects of the creative process, and especially with regard to novel writing.

The person

When glancing at the genius view’s conception of the artistic person, the latter appears to be characterised by three intricately interrelated factors. Firstly, the belief in creators’ outstanding, *innate* ability or talent in many ways lies at the

centre of the genius ideology. This is already evident from one of its most influential and shaping voices,¹¹⁹ the previously mentioned German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his classic *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* he famously states that ‘Genius is the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art.’¹²⁰ Therefore – and this already points to the notion’s determinism – to have been born with a special gift acts as one of the defining features of genius.

A person in possession of such a profound talent is necessarily viewed by Kant as ‘nature’s elect – a type that must be regarded as but a rare phenomenon.’¹²¹ This introduces the second aspect to be considered here, namely the elevated status and celebrated rarity of geniuses. In some writings, this leads to a declaration of the near or direct divinity of creators, deemed to exist on an entirely different plane from ordinary humans. As writer and critic Thomas Carlyle states in his famous *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840):

The most precious gift that Heaven can give to the Earth; a man of ‘genius’ as we call it; the Soul of a Man actually sent down from the skies, with a God’s–message to us...A messenger he, sent from the Infinite Unknown with tidings to us. We may call him Poet, Prophet,

¹¹⁹ As genius scholar Milton Nahm comments in his work *Genius and Creativity - An Essay in the History of Ideas*: ‘nineteenth and twentieth-century speculation concerning genius rarely escapes Kant’s influence.’ Milton C. Nahm, *Genius and Creativity - An Essay in the History of Ideas* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 128-9.

¹²⁰ Immanuel Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, *Electronic Text Centre, University of Virginia Library* [consulted at <<http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=KanJudg.xml&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>> (accessed February 2011)], SS46.

¹²¹ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, SS181.

God; - in one way or other, we all feel that the words he utters are as no other man's words. Direct from the Inner Fact of things.¹²²

Here, the extraordinary nature of geniuses goes so far as to elevate them into an unworldly species 'actually sent down from the skies.'

Thirdly, typical geniuses are also often believed to possess a set of extraordinary (and by no means always pleasant) character features.¹²³ Whereas a more detailed list of such 'genius' characteristic will be provided later on, what is most relevant for the moment is the fact that – just like the talent of genius – these tend to be approached as innate and therefore largely inflexible.

Naturally, as has already been hinted, all three – deterministic and hierarchical – assumptions about outstanding creators are incorrect. Starting with the notion of innate talent, we have previously mentioned many works within creativity research which crucially emphasise the inappropriateness of our clinging to this concept. The scholar Michael Howe in his work *Genius Explained*, for instance, illustrates through reference to a variety of different

¹²² Thomas Carlyle, 'On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History', *Project Gutenberg*, July 26 2008, [consulted at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1091/1091-h/1091-h.htm>> (accessed May 2010)], p. 13.

¹²³ Several illustrations of this will be provided later on. For the moment, let us simply exemplify this with reference to a famous statement by the 'genius' novelist William Faulkner, where he famously commented in a Paris Review interview: 'An artist can be driven by demons....He is completely amoral in that he will rob, borrow, beg, or steal from anybody and everybody to get work done...The writer's only responsibility is to his art. ('William Faulkner: Interview' (1956), in Philip Gourevitch (ed.), *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 36-7). Within the field of creativity literature, one finds virtually uncountable 'inventories' of the common personality traits of geniuses or – in more sceptical approaches – simply creators. As an example of this wide-spread phenomenon one may quote from Georg F Kneller's *The Art and Science of Creativity*, where he paints a portrait of creative individuals as characterised by 'intelligence, awareness, fluency, flexibility, and originality...also...the more controversial traits – scepticism, playfulness, self-confidence and nonconformity.' George F. Kneller, *The Art and Science of Creativity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 62.

studies¹²⁴ how ‘the sheer amount of training and practice a person has undertaken turns out to be the best predictor of high levels of expertise.’¹²⁵ He also emphasises the increasingly common estimate that about 10,000 hours of dedicated practice are necessary for the acquisition of outstanding ability in any given field, including creative writing. Hence, far from being a ‘gift from the gods’, evidence points firmly toward artistic ability being a painstakingly *acquired* skill.

A similar deconstruction may be presented of the genius-beliefs that artistic ability is only a ‘rare phenomenon’ and that artists are in necessary possession of a number of fixed character features. As to the former, several studies have illustrated that, instead of being inherently extraordinary, creative ability may be deemed a potentially universal property.¹²⁶ In order to prove this, one may refer to the artistic activity visible in young children which – although in later life it may or may not be chosen to be fully developed – appears to be a commonly observable phenomenon.¹²⁷ With regard to the latter, the scholars Jacob Getzels and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi have tested the correlation between the possession of special characteristics by art school students and their later

¹²⁴ Howe, for instance, mentions a study in which, in his own words, ‘it proved possible to train a random sample of quite ordinary adults to reach extraordinarily high levels of competence at a variety of skills. The standards these individuals achieved, solely as an outcome of intensive training, were so much beyond what most people regard as being possible that those who witnessed the skills being displayed were convinced that the individuals involved must have had a special innate gift or talent.’ Ibid., p. 195.

¹²⁵ Id.

¹²⁶ See, for instance, the innovative writings by Rob Pope in his work *Creativity – Theory, History, Practice*, where he emphasises that “‘being creative” is, at least potentially, the natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community’. Rob Pope, *Creativity – Theory, History, Practice* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), p. xvi.

¹²⁷ According to the creativity scholar Howard Gardner, for instance, people are generally very creative as children, yet lose some of that force through education and socialisation. Artists, however, manage to rise yet again to the kind of spontaneous creativity possessed during their childhood, combining it with what they have learned during their less creative phase. See Howard Gardner, *Art, Mind and Brain – A Cognitive Approach to Creativity* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

artistic achievements, in the hope of discovering precisely whether any inherent characteristics determined later artistic success. Interestingly, however, they were forced to conclude after a laborious, longitudinal study, that ‘essentially none of the measures obtained in art school related to career success.’¹²⁸

One may thus summarise that the genius vision of the creative person as innately talented, extraordinary and in possession of a number of very particular character features appears to be highly misleading. Far from the deterministic, hierarchical nature of creativity it implies, artistic potential seems to be common and artistic skill dynamically acquired.

The process

As to the creative process, the genius view has – in its most typical if also most extreme form – also tended to envision the creation of artworks as an inherently extraordinary and mysterious phenomenon, with artistic productions forcing themselves into existence, even against the artist’s own will. To illustrate this, one may mention one of the ‘fathers of psychoanalysis’, C.J. Jung, and his famous work *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, where he states that: ‘The unborn work in the psyche of an artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself, quite regardless of the personal fate of the man who is its vehicle.’¹²⁹ Apart from evidently implying that such mystic occurrences are phenomena as ‘rare’ as the

¹²⁸ One may add that the scholar Csikszentmihalyi furthermore comments: ‘To use a single example, young women in art school showed as much or more creative potential than their male colleagues. Yet twenty years later not one of the cohort of women had achieved recognition whereas several in the cohort of men were successful.’ (Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Creativity and Genius - A Systems Perspective’, p. 40) Within the particular context of this thesis one cannot help wondering if the failure of this creative ‘cohort of women’ was not rather considerably connected to the charter myth function of the genius notion itself.

¹²⁹ C.G. Jung, *The Spirit of Man, Art and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 75.

existence of geniuses themselves, the overtones of this vision of the creative process are clearly deterministic and even *fatalistic* in their conception of the individual being entirely out of control.

Again, it almost goes without saying that this view of artistic production can easily be demonstrated to be wrong. With particular reference to the apparently ‘automatic’ nature of the creative process, we have in fact already started to introduce a counter theory in the shape of the ‘three-stages’ model of creativity. The latter, with its interconnected levels of (1) Volition/Permission, (2) Execution/Revision and (3) Release/Reception emphasises how creative production – and especially the lengthy task of novel writing – is an intensely laborious matter, involving a great number of outward opportunities as well as intricate and varied psychological and technical skills. Among these, as Chapter Five will dwell on in some detail, a positive self-image and the related feature of confidence seem to be of particular importance. Thus, the creative process is not only dynamic in its reliance on factors such as personal initiative, but also in its fragility to the environment and a person’s particular interaction with it.

The product

Turning to the genius interpretation of the artistic product, this – as hinted – is typically conceived of as containing some absolute values which, albeit often at first rejected by blinded contemporaries, become eventually illuminated through the discerning eyes of posterity. As yet another influential voice on these matters, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, explains in his work *The Art of Literature* with regard to the figure of genius:

He thus comes to think more about posterity than about contemporaries; because, while the latter can only lead him astray, posterity forms the majority of the species, and time will gradually bring the discerning few who can appreciate him...His work is, as it were, a sacred object and the true fruit of his life, and his aim in storing it away for a more discerning posterity will be to make it the property of mankind.¹³⁰

Here, the work of genius becomes so universally valuable it is regarded as downright 'sacred'.

In addition, what we begin to see in this quote is a belief in history (or History) as a force which ultimately regulates reception in favour of outstanding creators ('time will gradually bring the discerning few'). This notion, still explicitly or implicitly common to this day, may be further illustrated through a Paris Review interview with the writer and writing theorist John Gardner and his reasoning as to why some books survive and others are dropped from our cultural heritage:

Gardner: In the long run, Melville's estate is vastly more than the estate of Octave Thanet. Octave Thanet¹³¹ was, I think, the bestselling novelist of the nineteenth-century. Melville told the truth, Thanet told high-minded lies. All liars are soon dead, forgotten. Dickens' novels didn't sell half as well as a novel of Octave Thanet called *A Slave to Duty*. But you

¹³⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature*, eBooks@Adelaide [consulted at <<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/schopenhauer/arthur/lit/>> (accessed May 2010)].

¹³¹ Unsurprisingly, when reading a work by Octave Thanet one cannot help feeling at a loss in which way, as a writer of overall very appealing *fiction*, she deserves the accusation of spreading 'high-minded lies'. Rather, as we shall see in later chapters, it seems that the very fact of her commercial success – and femaleness – seem to have jarred significantly with the idea of the autonomous male creator.

haven't heard of her, right? I know her only because I know obscure facts.

Interviewer: And that is why certain works of fiction have lasted and others have disappeared?

Gardner: Of course. So I believe. The ones that last are the ones that are true.¹³²

Like a secularised version of the Christian god, History is seen as rewarding good ('true') artistic products with literary immortality, while punishing the bad with oblivion.

Incidentally, we here also note a profound anti-commercial bias which is deeply inscribed into the genius ideology itself. The quote subtly pushes the idea that popular success is in some ways a necessary contradiction of a work's true 'genius' value (only to be established by posterity). This, in turn, may act as a strong psychological protection for many artists, to be discussed in the second part of this thesis. For the moment, let us simply once again emphasise how the genius notion endorses a view of History as ultimately just and reliable, defeating 'untrue' literature and the fickle forces of market success.

Of course, when once again turning to what may be called the actual 'reality' of art works and their reception, one may merely re-affirm the previously mentioned fact that artistic values appear to be inherently relative and their assessment far more chaotic than the genius view suggests. Evidently, this is an extremely complex topic. Still, this counter-truth strikes one as so clear it

¹³² 'Gardner, John: Interview' (1979), in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, pp. 173-4.

may simply be illustrated by referring to some of the numerous instances where the reception of art works varies enormously from one historical period or geographical area to another.

One contemporary example can be drawn from the cases of the two Latin American novelists Laura Esquivel and Isabel Allende, whose work tends to be seriously studied in the English speaking world, yet is often aggressively dismissed from literary studies in Latin America itself.¹³³ Another case in point is the Mexican film series *El Santo*, which is (again) generally regarded as cliché and populist entertainment in its place of origin, yet won a prize for its surrealist excellence in France.

In fact, even such supposedly universal geniuses as Shakespeare and Bach all have a traceable history of reception which shows that they and their work have by no means always been regarded in the same heroic light. As to Bach, he was considered highly ‘old-fashioned’ soon after his death,¹³⁴ whereas Shakespeare was famously rejected during the literary period known as

¹³³ A highly illustrative example of this can be found in a review of the work *McOndo* by the Chilean writer and journalist Alberto Fuguet, where the following comment on these differences in reception is made: ‘In their passionate criticism of magic realism, anthologists make a basic and clumsy mistake: They confuse the literature written in Latin America...with the Latin American literature that sells more successfully on the Western market...And, what is worse, they erase all differences between the masters of the genre like Rulfo, García Márquez or Carpentier and their emulators like Isabel Allende or Laura Esquivel who cleverly and cynically exploit the genre, cooking up bestsellers that bring in excellent dividends.’ (Diana Palaverish, ‘Macondo y otros mitos’, *literaturas.com*, June 2003, <<http://www.literaturas.com/McondoyotrosmitosOPINIONjunio2003.htm>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed June 2010). Apart from dealing precisely with the supposedly ‘misguided’ reception of the West, this statement is, of course, also fascinating in its gendering. For whereas the three masters of magic realism are male, the two women are described as witch-like literary creatures, knowing exactly which elements to combine in an unhealthy, manipulative broth that will grant them popular success.

¹³⁴ ‘Although Bach is presently regarded as one of the greatest composers who ever lived, his reputation was not always so exalted. When Bach died in 1750, public performances of his works essentially died with him and his music was ignored for seventy-five years. Even Bach’s own composer sons dismissed their father’s work as hopelessly old fashioned.’ Weisberg, *Genius and Other Myths*, p. 85.

Neoclassicism because (among other ‘errors’) he did not adhere to the Aristotelian unities of action, place and time.

Indeed, the reality of reception seems so very far from being governed by the kind of deterministic, causal logic the genius view suggests, that it may be proven by any ‘home-experiment’ of friends comparing their opinions about a specific novel, poem or film.

Nonetheless, it is also crucial to bear in mind that the assumption of complete and utter relativity (as, for instance, previously presented with reference to Carey and his belief that ‘Value...is not intrinsic in objects, but attributed to them by whoever is doing the valuing’¹³⁵) can also be considered a problematic basis for the analysis and – above all – practice of creativity. On the one hand, this is simply because works of art do seem to contain some at least vaguely inherent features, such as – in the case of novels – distinct levels of plot-orientation, usage of humour, linguistic registers and so on, which then become valued in different ways depending on contextual circumstances. More importantly given this thesis’ interest in the direct impact of ideas surrounding creativity on artists’ actual management of the creative process, however, is the fact that a belief in the full relativity of values may be regarded as, potentially, highly de-motivating. For, if all is relative, what kind of artistic aims are authors to strive for and why should they, ultimately, even try to laboriously improve their works?

If this already points to one reason why the absolutist theories of genius may prove lastingly attractive to authors themselves, it can presently be regarded

¹³⁵ See previous footnote Chapter One. Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?*, p. xiv.

as opening up a conceptual space – within the context of this thesis – for a counter ‘working aesthetic’. The latter – by no means to be understood as a new universalist approach to artistic values, but a guiding principle to orient the three-step model of creativity previously provided – can be described as an ideal of ‘personal originality.’

In essence, this is based on the idea that, if one of the core functions of literature may be the transmission of a potentially infinite number of different experiences, then, arguably, one of the chief authorial ‘tasks’ becomes that of fully revealing a *personal* vision of reality. As the author and writing theorist Dorothea Brande so interestingly notes in her creative writing classic *Becoming a Writer*:

If you can come to such friendly terms with yourself that you are able and willing to say precisely what you think of any given situation or character, if you can tell a story as it can appear only to you of all the people on earth, you will inevitably have a piece of work which is original. Now this, which seems so simple, is the very thing that the average writer cannot do.¹³⁶

Naturally, once we have left some deterministic, hierarchical views of the genius notion behind, we can regard *every human being’s* personal vision as a theoretically highly interesting material for fiction. At the same time, given that

¹³⁶ Brande, Dorothea, *Becoming a Writer* (reprint, with intro by John Gardner, New York: Penguin Putnam, 1981), p. 121.

this is ‘the very thing that the average writer cannot do’¹³⁷ we must also start from the assumption that this is a difficult ideal to follow, potentially complicated by numerous outward and internal obstacles, such as precisely those the myth of genius will be shown to often help impose on women.

In the course of this section we have thus seen that the notion of genius can be regarded as ‘mythical’ with reference to the first sense of the word – as a concept which is commonly believed in, yet untrue. If this is crucial for identifying its overall nature as a charter myth, there is yet another reason why an analysis of the genius view’s ultimate untruth is so central to our present discussion. One must not forget that, if the basic genius assumptions regarding the artistic person, process and product *were* true, then one would have to also grant the accuracy of the notion’s ‘narrative moral’. That is to say that, if creativity were actually such a profoundly deterministic phenomenon, where true ability is innate, artists are almost ‘forced’ to produce their work and the latter is – inevitably – discovered and celebrated, then one would be far harder pushed for an explanation for the almost complete absence of women from genius lists other than their inherent inferiority. As such, one would have to agree with the previously quoted article from *The Daily Mail* that women ‘have had their chance to excel, and in spite of well-meaning people...the female Shakespeare and the female Richard Wagner have simply not appeared.’¹³⁸

By the same logic, however, once we realise the profound misrepresentation of truth contained by the genius ideology on every level, we are also able to notice quite how gigantically unjust such supposedly accurate

¹³⁷ Note that given our previous deconstruction of the idea of ‘talent’, this inability is not seen as the result of a lack of innate capacity but rather of psychological and/or circumstantial limitations that can be (as will be more amply discussed) addressed and possibly removed.

¹³⁸ See previous footnote Chapter One, Wilson, ‘Only Men Can Be Geniuses’.

deductions have been on female creators, referring to a false version of reality to prove a fictional ‘theory’. Indeed, it seems that the myth’s determinism and a hovering belief in essentialist conceptions of the sexes and their correspondent destinies combine to lock women in a supposedly unchangeable pattern of predetermined submission and inferiority.

2.4. A story?

Let us now turn to our second definition of ‘myth’ as a culturally significant tale, and for the moment pause to consider whether the concept of genius can actually be seen as a ‘story’. Interestingly, an initial answer to this question might turn out to be a negative one. For – replete with its theories about the three Ps of creativity – the genius ideology more immediately strikes one as a kind of ‘cluster’ of beliefs; at a first glance, a narrative element seems to be missing.

Still, the picture changes considerably when one starts looking more profoundly at the way in which the concept is commonly applied and used. What begins to emerge when probing deeply into the available genius literature is the subtle yet significant deployment of this romantic ‘cluster of beliefs’ as a kind of archetypal pattern for a number of varied genius tales, starring a creative hero (and occasional heroine). Even though our accounts of geniuses seem to be a celebration of their utmost uniqueness, they actually often follow a kind of underlying character and plot pattern then to be filled with individualised heroes and tales.

The genius protagonist’s imagined features in many ways correspond to the elements previously outlined, such as innate talent, extraordinariness and – most significantly for this section – a specific set of personality traits. As one

may deduce from the available literature, these appear to above all consist of elements such as eccentricity, unsociability to the extent of cruelty, mental instability, obsessive artistic dedication, disinterestedness in and/or inability to deal with practical matters such as ‘real-life’ jobs or money,¹³⁹ heightened sensibility to perceive the naked truth about life and – as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter – maleness.

As to the genius myth’s implicit guideline for a story, like so many tales belonging to the Western world, it strikes one as primarily recounting a hero’s¹⁴⁰ grand journey from tragedy to triumph, through a terrifying yet successful struggle with numerous obstacles. Albeit always allowing for significant variations with regard to each individual manifestation of this genius narrative (which, in turn, can be seen as enabling the notion’s continued celebration of individuality), one may briefly and somewhat playfully present some of its most characteristic plot-points, again as cyclically (re-) created and perpetuated by the vast body of genius literature. Given the fact that – as hinted and still to be fully explored – the plot tends to be dominated by a *male* character, I shall now relate ‘his’ typical artistic exploits.

First of all, the story usually starts by the future genius displaying either his outstanding talent or specific character traits very early on in his life. The former becomes perhaps most famously illustrated by the numerous descriptions and accounts of Mozart as a miraculous child prodigy. The latter, which appears

¹³⁹ As will be outlined in more detail later on, very much lying at the heart of the genius mythology one finds a dichotomy between the logic of genius art and the market, the former being largely set up in opposition to the latter.

¹⁴⁰ One may add that the genius figure – precisely because of such character features as cruelty and/or mental instability – is not necessarily ‘heroic’ in the sense of presenting a protagonist who is highly likeable and in possession of only a few minor flaws. Rather, the genius becomes admirable due to his full dedication to art and the ultimate gift he ends up making to humanity.

to be somewhat more frequent with authors (perhaps because writing is a developmentally later skill than making music) can be depicted, for instance, with regard to Thomas Mann's Künstlerroman's *Tonio Kröger*. The artistic protagonist is clearly compared to his more 'worldly' friend with reference to the previously outlined genius character mould: Whereas the talented Tonio is described as 'dreamy and a little hesitant...his gait was nonchalant and a little unsteady', the uncreative yet otherwise admirable Hans is a strong boy whose 'slender black-stockinged legs moved with a springy and rhythmic step.'¹⁴¹

These precocious signs of later creative ability then typically become intensified when, very much in the spirit of Carlyle's god-like hero previously outlined, the future artist receives heavenly signs that he is one of the chosen creative prophets. This can be observed in a famous novel of artistic development, namely James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the protagonist, Stephen, suddenly realises that:

His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her grave-clothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice, Tonio Kroeger and Other Writings* (Continuum, New York, 2003), p. 2.

¹⁴² James, Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, [www.online-literature.com](http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/portrait_artist_young_man/4/) [consulted at <http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/portrait_artist_young_man/4/> (accessed February 2011)]. Of course, there exists a certain controversy as to whether or not Joyce's portrayal of a young genius is actually ironic. However, an answer to this difficult question is of no great relevance to the fact that the book strongly relies on the basic structure of the genius myth's narrative pattern for its portrayal of the main character.

Here, the boy thus ecstatically receives the lofty calling to ‘create...out of the freedom and power of his soul’.

Next in this overall story pattern, the artist/writer takes on his vocation which usually opens up a world of sublime wonders to him. This we may, for instance, see from William Wordsworth’s well-known insistence that good poetry is necessarily caused by ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’¹⁴³

At the same time, the genius also becomes submerged in the most varied sufferings. As Jeffrey Meyer comments with regard to Frank Kafka in his work *Married to Genius*:

Though Kafka could not endure life alone, he could only create in solitude. He hated everything that did not relate to art, and thought he would never be able to give up his tedious job if he married...And he felt that even if his wife transformed him into a fearless and powerful man, it might undermine the foundation of his work, which was based on anguish and torment.¹⁴⁴

Apart from an underlying element of misogyny which dismissively regards wives as potential (and potentially debilitating) helpmates, we here find a clear example of an artist tormented by a variety of conflicting feelings and difficult realities. What is more – according to Meyer’s interpretation – he seems to regard ‘anguish and torment’ as necessary experiences for his art.

¹⁴³ William Wordsworth ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism – An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, c1798), p. 358.

¹⁴⁴ Jeffrey Meyers, *Married to Genius – A Fascinating Insight Into the Married Lives of Nine Modern Writers* (Herts: Southbankpublishing, 2005), p. 15.

Still, it is not only creation itself which (as the story commonly goes) is experienced as painful by the genius. His very character features, so central for pushing him deeper and deeper into his artistic vocation, seem to cause an array of ‘worldly’ difficulties, such as rejection due to excessive (yet exalted) innovation, poverty, increasing mental instability and so on.

With regard to the matter of rejection, we may remember Schopenhauer’s insistence that a genius’ presumably misguided and unappreciative ‘contemporaries...can only lead him astray’ and are thus unable to receive an exalted work with due celebrations.¹⁴⁵

To illustrate the almost mandatory (and, naturally, related) poverty of the mythical genius figure, we may refer to George Gissing’s portrayal of the ‘serious’ writer Biffen in his novel *New Grub Street*. There, the author has to pay for his ultimate dedication to art for art’s sake by his ever-increasing struggles with debilitating financial hardship.¹⁴⁶

Finally, as to the association of genius with mental instability, we have already mentioned the origin of this idea in ancient Greece. To provide a more contemporary example of it, one may mention the portrayal of a mad ‘genius’ in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* where the increasingly unstable Septimus is described in the following terms:

he, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear the truth, to learn the meaning...no crime; love; he repeated, fumbling for his card and pencil, when a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers

¹⁴⁵ See previous footnote present chapter, Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature*.

¹⁴⁶ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, c1891).

and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man! ¹⁴⁷

Hence, the archetypal genius character is plagued by the most varied difficulties which endanger his mental and physical well-being.

However, due to his innate talent (which, as implied, requires hardly any special assistance or training) and his complete and utter dedication to his work, the hero is almost miraculously able to complete outstanding work in the midst of the most unbearable difficulties. In fact, it is often believed that a true genius is in part characterised by his ability to overcome all obstacles. ¹⁴⁸

Finally, as a reward for all those struggles, either during his life-time or through Schopenhauer's 'more discerning posterity', the artist is granted a kind of secular immortality in the form of eternal fame. Triumphantly, in the words of the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, he is finally allowed to reap the spiritual fruits of having created something which 'does not die away like a human being' but 'survives this time and all times, something that remains like sky, earth, sea, sun, moon and stars, these creations not of man but of god'. ¹⁴⁹ Ultimately, then, the value of his life and work is 'proven right in the end', by History.

After this general description of the character and plot pattern underlying the genius theory, we clearly begin to discern the profoundly narrative nature of what, at a first glance, appears to be only a theory or cluster of beliefs. Indeed –

¹⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Ware: Wordsworth Classic, 2003, c1925), p. 51.

¹⁴⁸ See ensuing discussion of this matter in Chapter Three.

¹⁴⁹ Stefan Zweig, *Das Geheimnis des künstlerischen Schaffens* (*The Secret of Artistic Creation*), (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991), p. 227, my translation. Original in German: 'wenn es nicht hinstirbt wie ein Mensch' sondern 'diese Zeit und alle Zeiten überdauert, etwas, das ebenso ewig bleibt wie Himmel, Erde, Meer, Sonne, Mond und Sterne, diese Taten nicht des Menschen, sondern Gottes.'

like the genius view of History where the latter becomes a god-like, omnipotent force – the emerging tale also strikes one as a paradoxically secular version of the familiar Christian narrative not only of the opposed prophet but of a human being called upon to suffer in this world in order to survive and be rewarded in the next. Of course, as has been hinted, this is not to say that every reference to serious artists or full-blown geniuses sticks to this precise list of features or plot developments; and yet, they seem to provide an overall mould to be filled with countless individualised accounts of (historical or fictional) heroes of creativity. This, in turn, acts as a crucial basis for its charter myth function, proving – as we shall see – a character and story pattern for artists and judges of art to rely on and identify (themselves or others) with.

2.5. A mythical tale?

It has been established that the notion of genius can be regarded as a ‘myth’ both with reference to its essential untruth and its subtle existence as a narrative pattern for a protagonist and story. During the course of this section we therefore, necessarily, turn to the question whether the notion of genius is not only narrative but also fully ‘mythical’ in its nature.

To begin with, one may briefly return to Lévi-Strauss’ understanding of myth as a phenomenon which gives ‘man...the illusion that he can understand the universe’¹⁵⁰ and harmonises opposing cultural forces to see whether these may be meaningfully applied to the concept of genius. With regard to the former, the elaborate theories about the artistic person, process and product can in effect be

¹⁵⁰ See previous footnote present chapter, Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 12.

seen as just such a ‘mythical explanation’, granting man the valuable illusion of comprehending the universe and the force of creativity within it.

As to a narrative harmonisation of contrasting cultural phenomena, one may remember previous allusions to the genius ideology’s secularised presentation of traditional Christian ideas (e.g. the overruling justice of history, the genius’ reward of a worldly immortality) to see how it also seems to paradoxically unite the contradictory forces of the secular and the spiritual within its intriguing plot. In addition, it in some ways also reconciles the potentially contradictory notions of artistic success and commercial failure, personal suffering and literary beatitude, failing in the present and succeeding in the future, all of which seem to become peacefully united within its mythical ‘plot.’

Moving on to the theories of Mircea Eliade, many of his core ideas also strike one as immediately relevant and profoundly illuminating with regard to the notion of genius. Commencing with the presence of supernatural beings, one may – once more – refer to Carlyle’s previous description of geniuses as ‘The most precious gift that Heaven can give to the Earth...We may call him Poet, Prophet, God’¹⁵¹ to see that outstanding artists are in effect often imagined as (at least) semi divine creatures. Moreover, both the mystical nature of geniuses and the creative process may be regarded precisely as signs of ‘sudden breakthroughs of the sacred’¹⁵² Eliade theorises about.

Also, and in direct relation to the scholar’s concept that myths tend to hover around the way supernatural beings bring a new reality into existence, this evidently forms the very core of most genius tales. For they are primarily concerned with chosen individuals bringing forth new elements – Mozart’s

¹⁵¹ See previous footnote present chapter, Carlyle, ‘On Heroes’, p.13.

¹⁵² See previous footnote present chapter, Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp.5-6.

symphonies, Shakespeare's plays, Dostoevsky's novels, etc. – which have resulted in the very civilisation as we know it today.

Yet what about the idea that myths are always modelled on a culture's original cosmogony? Here, while the genius story differs, even considerably, from the Christian myth of origin as outlined in Genesis¹⁵³ there nevertheless exists a striking and highly significant link. After all, one must not forget that frequently implicit in the genius view is a notion that the artist is no longer on a level with the first, disobedient humans, but in possession of such strong creative powers that he starts to emulate god. As Coleridge so famously states in his *Biographia Literaria*, artistic production becomes 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.'¹⁵⁴ The genius artist is often believed to repeat that first act of divine creation as recounted in our Biblical cosmogony.

So far, then, we have arrived at a remarkably close adherence of the genius notion to both Lévi-Strauss' and Eliade's definitions of myth. However, there remains yet another important element to be analysed: the latter's insistence that myths – just like the Melanesian tale about the pigs and dog – take place in a kind of primordial time, at the very outset of history. Now, considering that our cultural heroes tend to be firmly placed within historical time – we usually know

¹⁵³ Interestingly, there are actually two different accounts of creation as contained by the Bible. Whereas in both instances a masculine god acts as the soul creator of the universe, the implications for gender relations change radically from one to the other. In the first version god creates man and woman as equal (Genesis 1.27: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them', Genesis, on *The Bible Database* [consulted at <http://bibledatabase.net/html/kjv/genesis_2.html> (accessed May 2010)]. The latter and far more famous version, however, creates Eve out of Adam's rib and as his subordinate helpmate. In fact, the prevalence of this second version may also be strongly related to its own gendered charter myth appeal, narratively establishing the prevalence of men over women.

¹⁵⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria - Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Co., 1834, c1817), p. 172.

the precise birth and death dates of our ‘geniuses’, for instance – this aspect does not seem to correlate with the pattern of the romantic tale. Nonetheless, and this is crucial, this very aberration from Eliade’s definition of myth appears to point towards one of the genius notion’s key mythical messages and functions.

Very much related to its previously mentioned ability to narratively harmonise the spiritual and the material world, we can see how the concept – developing precisely during times of ever-growing secularisations such as the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution – pays homage to the divine as well as manifesting a clear emancipation from it. Indeed, one may argue that it is by taking place in historical time that the myth of genius becomes a paradoxically spiritualised celebration of the infinite possibilities and abilities of individual man within the context of his worldly existence. Yet in order to heighten the element of celebration and perceive the limits of this emerging individuality more clearly, it seems that not only god has to be pushed cognitively upward away, but also woman downward, so *mankind* may have an inferior other to raise itself up against.

Naturally, these are complex matters, to be dealt with in more detail in later chapters. For the moment, it may suffice to assert that there can be, by now, little doubt as to the profoundly mythical nature of genius, with reference to many different conceptions of the term. In fact, we have been able to distinguish only one element – the genius myth’s being set in historical rather than primordial time – which notably diverges from the notions outlined earlier on. Nonetheless this very aspect – as we shall see with regard to the significant rise of the genius myth during a period when women were beginning to emerge more powerfully within the literary field – seems to enhance the ideology’s basic

operation as a story celebrating the vast potential of historical *men* and subtly diminishing that of women.

After this outline of the deeply mythical nature of genius, it is now time to address some final questions essential to an understanding of the basic factors enabling its specific function as a *charter* myth.

2.6. The importance of being mythical

Chris Bilton comments in his work *Management and Creativity* that: ‘what is more puzzling is the resilience of the mythology of genius in the face of all the evidence Weisberg and others bring to bear against it, and in spite of our own everyday experience.’¹⁵⁵ In other words, how is it possible that a concept so easily proven to be wrong can retain such a powerful cultural impact? It is through approaching an answer to that question – the key aim of this final section of Chapter Two – that the powerful influence of all the previously discussed ‘mythical’ elements of genius and their direct implication in its basic charter myth functions will emerge.

First of all, then, the genius myth seems so lastingly common simply because it is extremely attractive and satisfactory on a variety of different levels. On a most basic plane, it is hard to ignore that – replete with its accounts of heroic struggles and triumphs, its air of mystery and cosmic significance – the underlying story pattern has immense narrative potential; and that alone may already account for the vast number of genius tales continuing to be told.

¹⁵⁵ Chris Bilton, *Management and Creativity - From Creative Industries to Creative Management* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 14.

Now, basic psychoanalytical theories such as those by Sigmund Freud or C.G. Jung have, of course, also long recognised the fact that myths tend to express and fulfil different needs. In effect, there is considerable evidence that the genius tale takes part of its profound appeal precisely from its ability to fulfil a number of deep-seated psychological functions. We have already mentioned the workings of genius as a basic explanation for creativity, which may be seen as responding to our crucial human urge to make sense of the world and the phenomena surrounding us. What is more, the scholar Robert Curie goes to some length to analyse the way in which the romantic ideology has sprung up precisely during the Industrial Revolution and its resultant problems of increasing alienation to provide the genius hero as a compensatory image of non-alienated man. As he states in his work *Genius – An Ideology in Literature*: ‘genius transcends the alienated condition...by introducing a higher or other order’¹⁵⁶

Also, its very essentialist core of envisioning artistic excellence as an innate calling and assigning men a hierarchically superior role to women naturally creates a potentially comforting sense of order and a meaningfully structured universe.

Still, apart from its inherent attractiveness, it is also important to emphasise that the very ‘falseness’ of many of the most basic genius assumptions outlined earlier on becomes diminished in its cognitive impact by several factors. One must, for instance, recognise the myth’s partial reference to actual experiences and a marked tendency to deploy circular arguments, both of which can strongly minimise much of the counter-evidence produced against it. To

¹⁵⁶ Robert Curie, *Genius – An Ideology in Literature* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 108.

name an example of the former, the kind of post-hoc reasoning so typical of the romantic ideology can easily create the impression that the individuals who happen to have been granted the genius accolade are precisely the ones innately ‘chosen’ to fulfil this lofty cultural role.

In a comparable manner, the belief in geniuses’ special ‘personality’ mentioned earlier may also end up affirming and, in fact, even partially creating itself. Weisberg notes in several of his writings (analysing the perceived correlation between genius and mental instability) how unstable individuals may, for example, actually choose to engage in certain creative activities precisely because they are commonly associated with practitioners suffering from psychological problems.¹⁵⁷

As to the way the genius view has been able to diminish the impact of the almost self-evident relativity of artistic judgment, this seems to be at least in part due to the paradox that the notion of genius does not actually celebrate values which are ‘universal’ in the sense that they are appreciated by all human beings. Quite to the contrary, the true worth of a work is almost by definition regarded as invisible to the ignorant masses and discernible only by a group of individuals almost as special and ‘elect’ as a creative genius itself. This belief, quite firmly established in our cultural heritage, has again been illustratively expressed by Schopenhauer, in writings such as the following:

The most excellent works of every art, the most noble productions of genius must always remain sealed books to the dull majority of men,

¹⁵⁷ As he outlines with reference to poets: ‘an inordinate number of poets may exhibit manic-depression because – in our society – poetry is assumed to be the refuge of individuals with such problems, so those individuals may tend to gravitate towards poetry.’ Weisberg, *Beyond the Myth of Genius*, p. 41.

inaccessible to them, separated from them by a wide gulf, just as the society of princes is inaccessible to the common people.¹⁵⁸

Hence, the actual relativity of artistic values can easily be rationalised away by claiming that those who do not recognise the greatness of a certain work simply form part of the ‘dull majority of men’. What we are thus facing here is the frequent operation of basic genius beliefs as self-affirming, cognitive circles which – and this will be shown also to be the case for women – can prove at points almost impossible to break.

Also with regard to the myth’s resistance to deconstruction enabling its basic charter myth functions, the very mythical nature of genius as previously outlined appears to endow it with the ability to appeal to us as a ‘higher’ truth, virtually becoming a matter of faith. As such, just like Christians can continue believing in the ‘higher’, metaphorical truth of the Biblical creation myth without having to accept it as *literally* accurate, so the genius myth’s description of creativity can be accepted without a *rational* adoption of all of its specific elements. That is to say that, on the one hand, aspects of the genius might be deployed as suitable metaphors not necessarily believed to be literally true. Or, on the other – given the fact that faith seems to appeal to us on a level different from rational thought – a more rational understanding of creativity may even (as alluded to in the previous chapter) peacefully co-exist with a conscious or unconscious endorsement of some crucial, genius elements. In either case, the continuation of the genius mythology, despite its untruth, can be granted,

¹⁵⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, quoted in Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, p. xii.

simultaneously also helping its gendered message to be – literally or metaphorically – passed on.

Ultimately – and this crucially combines the previous notion about the myth's inherent attractiveness and its resistance towards a lasting deconstruction – it also seems that many people are both so used to and have so much vested interest in the perpetuation of the genius myth, that they end up adapting their very experience of reality to fit the basic paradigms of the romantic ideology.

This phenomenon is addressed by John Teske in his work 'Neuromythology - Brains and Stories', where he points out the significant fact that a cognitive reliance on myth can often lead to a process of at least partial falsification. As he states, narrative structures provide not only 'a contingent solution to disunities of mind', 'but a solution that is likely only accomplished with varying degrees of success and may include a range of fictionalization and self-deception in all of us.'¹⁵⁹ That is to say that in order to benefit from the profoundly satisfactory function of genius, one may have to somewhat falsify one's experiences of the world to make them fit some basic mythical patterns. In this way, people may even cognitively cancel some evidence against the genius myth in order to perpetuate an often more appealing genius vision of reality.

Indeed, John Teske also explains – in some ways returning to basic 'explanatory' functions outlined earlier on – quite how heavily we rely on myth in order to make sense of ourselves and the world. As he illustrates in his previously mentioned work: 'myths, narratives, and stories engage human beings, produce their sense of identity and self-understanding, and shape their

¹⁵⁹ Teske, 'Neuromythology', p. 169.

intellectual, emotional, and embodied lives.’¹⁶⁰ In effect, and to amplify some elements previously quoted, he goes so far as to state that:

It is the neural substrate, the emotional shaping, and the narrative structuring of higher cognitive function that provide the sine qua non for the construction of meaning, relationship, morality, and purpose that extend beyond our personal boundaries, both spatial and temporal. These provide a contingent solution to disunities of mind, the construction of self and identity, and the alienation and fragmentation of personhood, relationship, and community.¹⁶¹

Thus, the scholar analyses how closely human beings tend to rely on narrative structures to order their perceptions of themselves and others, using them to create a sense of cohesion and, presumably, also as a cognitive guidance for their concrete actions and involvement in their surrounding reality.

This, in turn, may be regarded as the cognitive basis for the way in which the genius myth – as a narrative structure so crucial within the art world – has been able to work both inwardly and outwardly to perpetuate and re-establish itself. For, through its very existence as a mythical *story*, it seems to have acted as a common source for society to *identify* serious artists and for serious artists to identify *with*, consequently also ‘colouring’ their concrete interventions within the art world in ‘genius shades.’ In addition, as the subsequent chapter will show, it is of course because of this available story being an inherently gendered one

¹⁶⁰ Id.

¹⁶¹ Id.

that the myth of genius can pass on its particularly masculine message and narrative moral.

2.7. Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, we have demonstrated and explored the fact that the notion of genius, seemingly a ‘theory about’ or even the ‘reality behind’ artistic creation can be regarded as a myth in several ways. Firstly, its assumptions about the creative person, process and product are very common, yet crucially untrue. Secondly, it actually seems to provide an underlying pattern for a genius character and plot. Furthermore, this story mould – despite necessarily allowing for great variation – also contains a number of profoundly ‘mythical elements’ such as a central preoccupation with beginnings and breakthroughs of the sacred which position it firmly within a tradition of culturally significant, profoundly appealing and multifunctional tales.

Finally, it has been discussed why these very elements – as well as some other crucial feature of the genius myth such as an essentially cyclical logic which often manages to confirm or even create itself – have contributed to the puzzling persistence of the ideology despite so much counter-evidence against it. It is through these very aspects enabling its longevity – as well as the inherently gendered nature of the patterns of identification it provides – that the genius ideology has also been able to persistently and often inadvertently operate as ‘a hard-worked active force’¹⁶² which becomes ‘not merely a story told but a reality lived...continuing...to influence the world and human destiny.’¹⁶³

¹⁶² Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, p. 19.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Chapter Three: The Gendered Nature of Genius

3.1. Introduction:

If the previous chapter has been concerned with depicting the mythical nature of genius and how this significantly enables its continued charter myth function, this chapter aims to focus on an intrinsically related matter, namely the profoundly masculine *gendering* of the genius protagonist and tale. What is more, it will discuss the hypothesis that, in many ways, the myth can actually be seen as a direct reaction to an increased entrance of women into the literary field.

To illustrate these points, the chapter will be divided into three main sections. Section 3.2, 'A male protagonist', will manifest the profoundly masculine nature of the mythical protagonist pattern previously outlined and present the fact that it is often accompanied by female complementary roles who either act as subordinate helpers or direct antagonists to the distinctly male genius figure. Following on from this, Section 3.3., 'A gendered plot', then strives to show how even some crucial 'plot elements' of the narrative pattern underlying the myth, such as the idea that true geniuses overcome all obstacles and are inevitably 'proven right' in the end, are deeply gendered at their core, helping to confirm the tale's narrative moral. Finally, Section 3.4., will analyse some evidence for the fact that – at least in a subliminal manner – the concept of genius arose as a direct response to women's profound implication in the rise of the novel and as an attempt to actively diminish their impact and importance, re-affirming the patriarchal status quo. One may add that whereas the subsequent chapter is concerned with both historical and contemporary cases, this section will give prevalence to the former in its attempt to trace some of the key origins

of the genius myth's charter operations and the subordinate role of women in literary history.

What will ultimately emerge, then, is the gendering of genius as the second core element (besides its inherently mythical nature) to enable both its outward and inward functions as a self-fulfilling masculine circle. The latter is principally due to the fact that it establishes the core gender division lying at the heart of the myth's character/plot pattern and narrative moral. This, relying on Teske's theory of mythical identification outlined in the previous chapter, will in subsequent chapters be shown to act as such a powerful source of reference for the outward identification of 'great authors' and, inwardly, for writers' own (gendered) sense of identity.

3.2. A male protagonist

His personality

Starting with the gendering of the mythical protagonist, then, this has already received a certain interest from a minority of creativity scholars like Rob Pope in his work *Creativity – Theory, History, Practice*¹⁶⁴ and feminist philosophers such as, most notably, Christine Battersby in her study *Gender and Genius* and Carolyn Korsmeyer in *Gender and Aesthetics* and 'Feminist Aesthetics'.

Among these theorists, Korsmeyer shows a particular concern with the gendered personality of the genius figure. She highlights how the mythical

¹⁶⁴ Unlike many writers on the matter of creativity, Pope explicitly recognises that: 'It is also abundantly clear...that the concept of "genius" is deeply gendered. It is the ultimate embodiment of "the great man as creator" – or "destroyer". Either way, the emphasis falls equally upon "great" and "man"', *Creativity – Theory, History, Practice*, p. 105.

character pattern of the cultural hero contains a number of features traditionally associated with and often only seen as socially acceptable in men.¹⁶⁵

Elements of this belief have in effect already been expressed by numerous theorists on female creativity. Virginia Woolf – in her classic work about woman writers, *A Room of One's Own* – comments on how the very visibility associated with genius status clashes with an ideal of women as quiet background figures.¹⁶⁶ More recently – the creativity scholar Helson argues in her work ‘Creativity in Women – Outer and Inner Views Over Time’: ‘Creativity is associated with power and power is socially given to men. To initiate, change, and create are manifestations of power. So it is not seen as natural or appropriate for women to be creative.’¹⁶⁷

Interestingly, this male coding of character features does not even seem to be confined to socially esteemed features such as power and visibility. Even the genius ‘flaw’ of cruelty previously mentioned tends to be discerned as a distinctly male feature. To name two examples of this, the prolific diarist and novelist Anaïs Nin recounts how the famous psychoanalyst Otto Rank told her that one of the reasons why women have rarely been great artists is because they

¹⁶⁵ As such, Korsmeyer explains in her work ‘Feminist Aesthetics’: ‘While genius is a rare gift, according to most theorists the pool of human beings from which genius emerges includes only men. Rousseau, Kant, and Schopenhauer all declared that women possess characters and mentalities too weak to produce genius. This judgment represents a particular instance of more general theories that attribute to males the strongest and most important qualities of mind, in comparison to which females are but paler counterparts. At least since Aristotle, rationality and incisive intellect have been regarded as “masculine” traits that women possess in lesser degrees than males.’

¹⁶⁶ Woolf analyses the fact that the search for fame is usually encouraged in men while deeply prohibited for women with reference to the famous and highly influential quote by the ancient Greek orator Pericles: “a good woman is one who is not talked about, even in praise.” Pericles, quoted in Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁷ Ravenna Helson, ‘Creativity in Women - Outer and Inner Views Over Time,’ in Robert S. Albert and Mark A. Runco (eds.), *Theories of Creativity* (London, Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 45.

cannot destroy.¹⁶⁸ Or – to illustrate that similar ideas also circulate within feminist circles – the theorist Nicole Ward Jouve asks in her work *Female Genesis* with regard to women's (and especially mother's) ability to create: 'what of the incompatibility between the caring, the considerateness, the nurturing that mothering demands, and tends to develop in its practitioners, and the cruelty that creation requires?'¹⁶⁹ Hence, either in the form of highlighting the socialised roles of women as incompatible with the imagined genius character or – as Rank and Ward Jouve appear to do – relying on a kind of essentialist conception of women- and motherhood, the very character features of the personality pattern may be viewed as encoded with traditional images of masculinity.

A masculine body

What may be regarded as even more remarkable, however, is that the myth of genius actually seems to go so far as to prescribe a male anatomy for its leading role. In order to fully understand this phenomenon, let us return to the historical overview presented during the first chapter. In this manner, we shall see how the notion of genius has always been closely associated with (physical) masculinity, thus subtly imprinting its sexed connotations onto many people's minds to this day.

Let us start off with ancient Greece as the first period crucial for the development of the genius idea. Here, we already notice the implicit maleness of the artist through the influential figure of the 'muse' which acts as a kind of

¹⁶⁸ Anaïs Nin about her psychoanalyst Otto Rank in *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume II, 1934-39*, Gunther Stuhlmann (ed.) (New York: The Swallow Press, 1967), p. 31.

¹⁶⁹ Nicole Ward Jouve, *Female Genesis – Creativity, Self and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 166.

sexualised imagery of a female force inspiring the normative masculine creator.¹⁷⁰

Moving swiftly on, we have already mentioned the fact that the Latin word ‘genius’ was, first of all, used to refer to a literal spirit of procreativity. What is more, this force was exclusively concerned with a masculine contribution to reproduction, explicitly acting as a (worshipped¹⁷¹) representation of the male seed. As the historian of genius, Jane Chance Nitzsche, explains in her work *Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ‘genius’ – in its most original usage – was no less than:

the begetting spirit of the family embodied in the paterfamilias. In time it came to be associated with the husband, and then any man, married or unmarried...The Genius of the family acted as ‘a simile for the male seed,’ which was transmitted from one generation to another by father and son, and which embodied the primitive equivalent of the genetic code. Artistic depictions of the figure usually included a cornucopia, symbolizing the seed, frequently containing phalli and held in the left hand.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ One may add that this imagery can still be found in numerous narratives today, such as the film *Shakespeare in Love* directed by John Madden, where the female protagonist Viola becomes the muse and lasting inspiration of the genius dramatist and poet. Or – drawing from popular literature – one may mention the novel *Twenties Girl* by Sophie Kinsella, where one of the main characters, the ghost of an old lady, discovers that her life was, after all, of great importance because she was the muse of a celebrated painter. In each case, although women are given their respective mythical glow, the role of the genius is filled by a male body.

¹⁷¹ Incidentally, the genius of every man was particularly worshipped on an individual’s birthday, originating our lasting cultural tendency to eat cakes and sweets on that day.

¹⁷² Jane Chance Nitzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (London, New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 20.

Thus, 'genius' originally acted as a kind of 'patron saint' of the male seed and the male body as a whole.

As has been hinted, the idea of genius as a 'spirit' then remains alive in various forms throughout the Middle Ages. In addition, it also gains longevity because an allegorical figure called Genius becomes an increasingly common feature in writings of that period, such as – for instance – Alanus de Insulis' twelfth-century work *De Planctu Naturae* (a strong influence on Chaucer) or the famous *Roman de la Rose*. Now, as Battersby indicates, this figure not only already displays many of the features central to the genius idea today, such as its position between the worldly and the divine, and its association with creativity; it is also always, infallibly, male. In the scholar's words:

Genius is a character in a number of medieval allegories, and in these allegories we can detect the following pattern...*Genius* is always personified as a male...The Stoics claimed that *Genius* is both cosmic and within each individual man. The medieval writers agree. *Genius* is up in the heavens, but also in man on earth...In one of his aspects, *Genius* becomes creative, rather than procreative. He is a being who wrote, drew or painted reality into existence. Less important than God Himself, but more important than Goddess Nature, *Genius* is transformed into a kind of Platonic demiurge whose job is to create a spatio-temporal reality.¹⁷³

Therefore, apart from arguably originating the allegorical functioning of the myth, Genius becomes a prominent literary figure arguably helping to preserve

¹⁷³ Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 62.

its creative, mythical, metaphysical, and masculine connotations for future generations to readily draw upon for their 'new' cultural ideal.

To continue this brief journey through the gendered history of genius, the (catholic) Christian faith – albeit not confinable to a single historical period – also seems to have had a very strong influence on the myth of genius in general and its gendering in particular. To name only a few examples of this, its association with exalted (male) figures such as prophets, priests, Christ and even God all emphasise its underlying masculinity.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, it has been mentioned that during the Renaissance (apart from a gradual mixing of various notions now associated with the heroic artist) there was an ever growing emphasis on the notion of individual talent, or 'ingenium'. Interestingly, Battersby further highlights in *Gender and Genius* that the idea in itself was also 'central to rationalizations of male supremacy', 'used to explain why a female's "wits" – her judgment and talents – should be inferior too those of a male'.¹⁷⁵

Having now arrived at Romanticism, as the period by which all of the ideas mentioned (and more) have come together to form the concept of genius as we know it, a rather complex factor may be highlighted. For, considering the fact that the category contains its *seeming* gender neutrality, the 'sexing' of the genius now in some ways becomes more subtle. This trend may be observed in the previously mentioned writings by Immanuel Kant. At a superficial glance, the philosopher's theory on an artistic hierarchy (arguably one of the central

¹⁷⁴ As Anaïs Nin famously states with regard to the latter: 'as to all that nonsense Henry [Miller, the novelist] and Larry talked about, the necessity of "I am God" in order to create (I suppose they mean "I am God, I am not a woman")'. Anaïs Nin quoted in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic - The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (London, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

¹⁷⁵ Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 71.

points of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*) where ‘fine art’ as the creation of geniuses takes the top rank, may appear to be gender neutral.

When looking more closely, however, one notices that not only is the normative genius artist, once more, assumed to be male, but women actually become connected to lower forms of art. As the following statement may illustrate:

Of certain products which are expected, partly at least, to stand on the footing of fine art, we say they are soulless; and this, although we find nothing to censure in them as far as taste goes. A poem may be very pretty and elegant, but is soulless. A narrative has precision and method, but is soulless...Even of a woman we may well say, she is pretty, affable, and refined, but soulless.¹⁷⁶

Rather than being considered a potential artist in her own right, then, woman is here clearly deployed as a *metaphor* to explain the shortcomings of some less worthy productions. The normative genius is, once again, male.

Finally, one may simply refer to some previously mentioned modernist narratives such as *Tonio Kröger*, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* or *Mrs. Dalloway* with the mad genius Septimus to see that even during this early twentieth-century revival of the genius logic, the outstanding creator continues to assume a predominantly male body. As to our own times, we have already seen with reference to genius lists or contemporary stories such as *Shakespeare in Love* or *Twenties Girl* (see previous footnote) that little has changed with regard

¹⁷⁶ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, SS 45.

to this. Genius creators are still almost exclusively presented as possessing a male body. This indeed appears to be partly caused by the originally masculine coding of the mythical protagonist-pattern which – lying at the cyclical core of the myth's charter function – manages to constantly perpetuate itself.

A female subordinate role

Interestingly, however – and as has been hinted – the myth's inherent gendering seems to go still further than this. For, apart from normatively casting a male body for its lead role, it also provides a number of other subordinate parts for women. In this way, it not only opens up further – and as we shall see often problematic – sources of identification for (female) creators, but also fulfils another basic requirement of mythical narratives, namely that, on the whole, myths 'come in two'. As John Teske emphasises in 'Neuromythology': 'There are always two characters, though we may see ourselves in either role, such as the stories of Psyche and Eros, Pygmalion and Galatea, Orpheus and Eurydice.'¹⁷⁷

Let us now turn towards a tentative list of all the subordinate female roles the myth seems to prescribe, often in close relation to the historical outline presented earlier on.

A subject matter

First of all, woman is coded not as the artist but as a subject matter for art. This – already indicated with regard for Kant where a woman is compared to a lower form of creation – also becomes discussed in some detail by Virginia Woolf in *A*

¹⁷⁷ Teske, 'Neuromythology', p. 192.

Room of One's Own. There, she comments on the paradox that even though woman seems to be one of the subjects most extensively written about, it is hard to locate a great number of active and accomplished female writers.¹⁷⁸ If this alternative role is in some ways least important for this thesis (as it provides no alternative physical body for identification), it nevertheless crucially shows the depth of real women's mythical exclusion from playing an active artistic part.

The muse

Naturally, this association with woman as a subject matter rather than a creator of art is also related to the female figure of the muse previously mentioned. As indicated, the latter clearly establishes an imagery of the active male artist as complemented by a passive female force. To further illustrate this point, let us turn to the work 'Reclaiming the Muse' by Penny Murray, where she states:

This image of the Muse as loved object who inspires the male artist, whilst she herself remains silent, is deeply engrained...man creates, woman inspires; man is the maker, woman the vehicle of male fantasy, an object created by the male imagination, incapable of any kind of agency herself. In short, this image of the Muse denies woman's active participation in artistic creation and silences female creativity.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ As she, for instance, comments: 'Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?' Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 33.

¹⁷⁹ Penny Murray, 'Reclaiming the Muse', in V. Zajko and M. Leonard (eds.), *Laughing With Medusa* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press., 2006), p. 327.

Here, apart from further manifesting the profound masculinity of the genius creator, we also see how, even at its very origins, the myth already contains a different, specifically female role.

The procreator

During the introduction, it has also been hinted that one of the arguments often brought up to confirm the narrative moral of the genius myth is the gendered dichotomy that men produce great art and women have babies. In many ways, this makes reference to another female role subtly symbolised by the romantic mythology (albeit mainly as an oppositional category), namely that of the ‘procreator’. If this is deeply inscribed in a common patriarchal role division between men and women in general, we can also see its specific connections to the genius myth, especially with regard to its Latin origins. In fact, the masculine spirit of genius had its direct female counterpart in the figure of Juno. As Nietzsche highlights in *Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*: ‘The Genius of the head of the household was complemented by the Juno of the mother: the father begot the child, but the mother bore it, and this feminine spirit protected the wife’s fertility and capacity for bearing children.’¹⁸⁰ However, whereas the procreative nature of male genius eventually developed its associations with a less physical form of creation – art, the connection between women and the bearing of children remained intact, indicating her alternative, mythical, task.

One may add that some theorists have highlighted how the notion of genius actually retains many of its ideational connections to reproduction, often

¹⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, p. 11.

depicting artists as ‘giving birth’ to the children of their brains. Nevertheless, the implication remains that this ‘higher’ form of procreation is a masculine preserve,¹⁸¹ whereas women are ‘called’ to the lower realm of reproducing mere ‘mortals’. In other words – and remembering Zweig’s previous quote – it is women who give birth to and raise beings that ‘die away’, while the sublime male artist can produce a work of art which ‘survives this time and all times’.¹⁸²

The helpmate

In many ways closely associated with women and their mythical roles as muses and procreators, another subordinate part contained by the genius myth is that of the ‘helpmate’. This can, in some ways, be traced back to the previously mentioned interconnection between the romantic ideology and Christianity, and more specifically the latter’s cosmogony. For in the latter, the mythical woman – Eve – is clearly depicted as an inferior helper to man: ‘And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help mate for him.’¹⁸³ What is more, we have seen how the Christian myth further establishes an ideational connection between the genius creator and god, whereas the female helpmate comes to associatively exist on an incomparably lower hierarchical level.

¹⁸¹ The following statement by Balzac may serve as a manifestation of how extensively some ‘male geniuses’ have drawn upon procreative imagery to describe their mental creations: ‘To pass from conception to execution, to produce, to bring the idea to birth, to raise the child laboriously from infancy, to put it nightly to sleep surfeited, to kiss it in the mornings with the hungry heart of a mother, to clean it, to clothe it fifty times over in new garments which it tears and casts away, and yet not to revolt against the trials of this agitated life – this unwearying maternal love, this habit of creation – this is execution and its toils.’ Balzac, quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 12.

¹⁸² See previous footnote, Chapter Two. Zweig, *Das Geheimnis*, p. 227.

¹⁸³ 2.18 Genesis, *The Bible Database*.

The antagonist

Let us now turn to yet another mythical counter-role presented by the genius myth, namely that of the ‘antagonist’ or – in its more particular form – the ‘bad writer (and reader)’.¹⁸⁴ Whereas a notion of the antagonistic nature of women is again already inscribed in the biblical myth of origin, where Eve bites into the forbidden apple and seduces Adam to do the same, a more literature-specific variation of this theme seems to be the particular off-spring of the pre-Romantic/Romantic times. For as we shall see towards the end of the chapter, it was during this period that women become associated with the relatively new phenomenon of ‘commercial’ and ‘mass’ literature, hierarchically far beneath the sublime works created by men. In addition, as the readership of one of these new commercial genres – the novel – was predominantly female, women also in many ways became associatively coded as ‘bad readers’, helping to flood the market with ‘soulless’ products developed to suit their lowly literary appetites.

That this female role has, again, remained relevant to this day will be illustrated with regard to several phenomena, including that of the contemporary ‘chick-lit’ genre. For the moment, let us move onto the final division here mentioned, namely that of the ‘exceptionally exceptional’ or ‘freak genius’.

The ‘exceptionally exceptional’ or freak genius

This final counter-role to be discussed can even more strongly be regarded as a child of the romantic concept of genius proper. Indeed, in an inescapable double bind directly related to the masculine coding of the myth and its other alternative

¹⁸⁴ Incidentally, even the category of the female literary helpmate has often exposed women to contempt, as we have briefly seen with regard to the previous quote about Kafka and as is also evident from famous cases such as Tolstoy’s often powerful anger against the worldly concerns of his wife that helped him to write.

female roles, it has led to the depiction of female geniuses as essentially unnatural and unable to fulfil their original destiny as women. Countless quotes may illustrate this. For the moment, let us firstly refer to the novelist Thackeray, who writes in a letter to a friend about Charlotte Brontë:

The poor little woman of genius! The fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature. I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy her in her book [Villette] and see that rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one, she wants some Tomkins or another to love her and be in love with.¹⁸⁵

Following on from the gendered logic of genius, Brontë's achievements within an essentially male category thus become re-interpreted as an ultimate failure as a woman.

In a similar vein – and we have now arrived at the past century – the scholar Andrew Germant explains in *The Nature of Genius* (1961): ‘nearly always highly gifted women, approaching to some degree the nature of a genius, are masculine...They are actually half men, physically and mentally, their primary sexual organs happening to be female.’¹⁸⁶ Therefore, rather than becoming an example of female eminence, the few female geniuses admitted by the canon seem to form an anti-category in its own right, as freaks of nature who have abandoned their mythical, womanly territory. Naturally, the very fact that they are portrayed as unnaturally *male* re-affirms the mandatory masculinity of the mythical image.

¹⁸⁵ Thackeray, quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 232.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Germant, quoted in Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 20.

In this section, we have therefore not only begun to see the profound masculinity of the genius myth, but also the way it contains a variety of subordinate or antagonistic counter-roles for women. This not only further emphasises the mythical nature of genius, as myth (like Malinowski's tale about pigs and dogs) usually 'comes in two'; it also highlights the tale's provision of two hierarchically ordered, gender-divided sources of identification, according to which – as we shall see in later chapters – men and women are judged and/or choose themselves as potential artists.

However, there is still another factor which underpins the masculine workings of the genius myth, namely the powerful gendering of its plot which helps to constantly stress and rationalise its underlying narrative moral.

3.3. A gendered plot

As implied, the profoundly gendered nature of genius analysed in the previous section has already gained a certain amount of attention by feminists and creativity scholars. What has hardly been addressed, however, is the fact that not only the character but also the plot pattern of the genius myth may be viewed as distinctly masculine in its orientation. Indeed, some of its basic plot elements as discussed in the second chapter (such as the idea that geniuses overcome all obstacles, lead their lives exclusively dedicated to their art and have their works of inherent, universal value proven right in the end) are also both inaccurate and help to cognitively perpetuate the tale's narrative moral of female inferiority.

True genius needs no education

Let us start with the subtly gendered idea that true geniuses needs no training, a belief which may be seen as very much lying at the core of the deterministic ideology. As the previously referred to Edward Young states in his work *Conjectures on Original Composition*:

Genius...leaves but the second place, among men of letters, to the Learned...For Genius may be compared to the Body's natural strength; Learning to the superinduced Accoutrements of Arms: if the First is equal to the proposed exploit, the latter rather encumbers, than assists; rather retards, than promotes, the Victory.¹⁸⁷

The artistic excellence of genius being supposedly innate, learning becomes regarded as 'encumbering rather than assisting' the creative process.

Remembering many elements such as a deconstruction of the belief in the 'special' and naturally talented artist as presented in the previous chapter, this notion may be considered yet another of the profoundly misrepresentative concepts of the genius myth, as education is of course crucial for eventual artistic achievement. A specific study on the educational level of celebrated male authors, for instance, reveals that 'of 163 major writers from 1780 to 1930, over half the men in each fifty-year period had attended Oxford or Cambridge.'¹⁸⁸ Similarly, John Gardner emphasises with regard to Hemingway's 'genius' claim that writers need no education but should simply 'go away and

¹⁸⁷ Young, 'Conjectures on Original Composition'.

¹⁸⁸ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 40. Evidently, this also points us towards a class element crucial in the construction of eminent writers which will be more directly addressed during the final chapter of this thesis.

write’: ‘Hemingway, it is helpful to remember went away for free “tutorials” to two of the finest teachers then living, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein.’¹⁸⁹ Therefore, training actually tends to be of considerable benefit for writers.

Apart from being untrue, however, the belief in the existence of ‘raw’ genius is inherently gendered. This is largely due to the myth’s minimisation of the fact that education is precisely one of the elements women have most crucially lacked.

Let us briefly highlight this point through the specific example of England: Even though girls did previously have some learning opportunities through the church, education during the Elizabethan period – the time of the quintessential literary genius, Shakespeare – became secularised and exclusively open for boys. As a result, the only chance of acquiring knowledge for girls was to study at home, in case their parents allowed it.¹⁹⁰ With regard to university education, the first women’s residential college, Girton in Cambridge, was not founded until 1869 and did not give permission to ‘women to be *equal* members of the university for another eight years.’¹⁹¹ The first college for men in Cambridge, Peterhouse, on the other hand, was founded in 1284,¹⁹² giving men a total of almost 600 years more access to education and formal training.

Nonetheless, the genius myth – with its emphasis on the idea that true geniuses need no learning – can significantly disqualify the sheer cultural impact of women’s educational disadvantage, by suggesting that, if only they had been true geniuses, they would have been able to thoroughly shine without it.

¹⁸⁹ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁰ Stevenson, *Women Writers in English Literature*, p. 26.

¹⁹¹ Storkey, *Origins of Difference*, p. 18.

¹⁹² Id.

Geniuses overcome all obstacles

It is now time to address another plot element which is in many ways directly related to the above, namely the idea that true genius is able to overcome all obstacles.¹⁹³ Now, as has already been shown during the previous chapter, this belief may again be seen as essentially untrue, as creators and their output appear to be strongly affected by a myriad of outward and inward factors which operate in constant, dynamic interaction.¹⁹⁴ In addition, the idea also seems to be indirectly yet forcefully gendered, resulting – not unlike the previously mentioned notion that true geniuses need no education – in a cognitive minimisation of the countless historical and in some cases contemporary hindrances which women writers have had to face.

The overall logic behind this may be first of all explained through a personal anecdote. When once telling a group of my students about my research into the gendered nature of genius and the theory that it was correlated with past discriminations against women writers, a male student of mine protested. He agreed that most recognised geniuses were male, but negated the possibility of any forms of discriminations or other obstacles having limited women's achievement, because, according to him: 'If only they had been real geniuses, they would have been able to overcome all obstacles.'

¹⁹³ The psychoanalytical scholar Kristeva, for instance, asks towards the end of her trilogy *Female Genius* whether genius was not 'precisely that reach through and beyond the "situation"?', arguably displaying a lasting belief that true artists are in part defined by their very ability to overcome their contextual limitations. Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, Vol. 3 of *Female Genius - Life, Madness, Words - Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 406-7.

¹⁹⁴ The novelist Katherine Anne Porter seems to hold a similar opinion when she poignantly states with regard to this matter: 'I have no patience with this dreadful idea that whatever you have in you has to come out, that you can't suppress true talent. People can be destroyed, they can be bent, distorted and completely crippled.' Katherine Anne Porter, quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 66.

In fact, a similar conclusion is reached by the scholar Camille Paglia, who states in her work *Sexual Personae*: ‘Male conspiracy cannot explain all female failures. I am convinced that, even without restrictions, there still would have been no female Pascal, Milton, or Kant. Genius is not checked by social obstacles: it will overcome.’¹⁹⁵

Both examples have thus once more brought us right to the heart of the genius myth’s narrative moral and the belief that if women are not equally hailed as eminent artists in our culture, it is because they have lacked the innate ability to achieve such heights.

This minimisation is particularly striking giving the sheer amount of obstacles women have had to face, the previously analysed lack of education only acting as one example. Although writing is, evidently, a difficult pursuit for both sexes, numerous scholars have pointed towards the endless historical and contemporary difficulties for female writers, many of which have been directly related to women’s traditional assignment to the mythical roles of the procreator or helpmate.

As such, it has – for instance – been demonstrated that women’s subordinate roles in patriarchy have led to their owning far fewer economic resources. In her article ‘Women’s Rights’ Anup Shah quotes the well-known problem that ‘Women do two-thirds of the world’s work, receive ten percent of

¹⁹⁵ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae - Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 653.

the world's income and own one percent of the means of production.'¹⁹⁶ As a result, they have naturally also had far less time available for writing.

Interestingly, in his previously mentioned work *The Gendered Society*, Kimmel also points out that to this day, women are far more involved in childcare and housework than men, both of which may be directly related to their alternative roles as procreators and helpmates. As he states with reference to a US study on this matter:

The median amount [of childcare] for men was about five hours a week; for women it was about twenty hours. Men reported that they did ten percent of the housework in 1970, and twenty percent in 1990 – which, depending upon how you look at it, represents double the percentage in only twenty years, or, still, only one-fifth the amount that needs to be done.¹⁹⁷

This significant dedication to tasks prescribed by alternative female roles, then, may be regarded as leading to crucial outward obstacles which have often kept women from producing work in the first place.

But – as we shall also see in more detail – women have not only been prevented from creating by numerous problems, they have also often had their actual writing taken away from them. To name only a few well-known examples of this, let us first of all refer to the famous diarist Samuel Pepys who wrote on the discovery of his wife's diary: 'so piquant, and wrote in English and most of it

¹⁹⁶ Anup Shah, 'Women's Rights', *Global Issues*, <<http://www.globalissues.org/article/166/womens-rights>>, 14 March 2010, World Wide Web Publication, accessed July 2010.

¹⁹⁷ Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, p. 135.

true, of the retirednesse of her life and how unpleasant in was, that being writ in English and so in danger of being met with and read by others, I was vexed at it and desired her and then commanded her to teare it.’¹⁹⁸

At other times, women’s writing was not destroyed, but directly incorporated into the creation of male writers. Here, one case in point is that of D.H. Lawrence who – as recent studies have revealed – drew largely from the writings of women close to him, such as those by Jessie Chambers for his novel *Sons and Lovers*. In effect, the critic Hilary Simpsons concludes on studying the latter’s contributions in a source known as *The Miriam Papers*: ‘It is clear that some of the most vivid scenes in the novel derive from Jessie’s reminiscences. Lawrence often takes sentences directly from her manuscript; some of the descriptions of nature, especially, go into *Sons and Lovers* almost exactly as Jessie wrote them.’¹⁹⁹

Finally – if by no means conclusively – some male writers have also directly stolen the work of female artists, one of the most documented cases being that of Zelda Fitzgerald and Scott F. Fitzgerald. Indeed, the latter is known to have gone out of his way to keep his wife’s diaries and novel from being published, to have included much of her writing in his own work and to have published some of her stories under his name, thus combining the three phenomena of literary destruction, incorporation and theft here mentioned.

All of these occurrences, then, may be seen as severe obstacles on the path of literary women’s inclusion into the ‘genius’ canon. Nevertheless, they can all be conceptually minimised by the gendered idea that if only women had

¹⁹⁸ Samuel Pepys quoted in Stevenson, *Women Writers in English Literature*, p. 8.

¹⁹⁹ Hilary Simpsons quoted in Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 153.

been innately talented and gifted enough, they would have overcome the countless difficulties that stood in their path.

Geniuses spend their lives fully dedicated to their art

Let us now move on to yet another notion typically contained by the genius plot, namely the idea that true artists spend their lives in complete dedication to their calling, working day and night on their lonely, heroic pursuit.

As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter with regard to the 10,000 hour rule of artistic development, it is – of course – true that the acquisition of literary skills involves a lot of time and task commitment. Still, this does not necessarily mean that *all* of an author's time and energy has to be perpetually spent on his or her novelistic creations.

This may, for instance, be manifested by turning to the Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison and glancing at her working habits. As the writer states in a *Paris Review* interview, with reference to her being a mother with full-time employment: 'I am not able to write regularly. I have never been able to do that – mostly because I have always had a nine-to-five job. I had to write either in between those hours, hurriedly, or spend a lot of weekend and predawn time.'²⁰⁰ Therefore, while we may clearly observe that writing takes a lot of dedication – Morrison's working at dawn and on weekends arguably shows enormous task commitment – this does not necessarily take the form of artists spending all day alone on their creations.

Yet, quite besides its basic inaccuracy, the notion that true geniuses dedicate their lives entirely to their art may also – once more – be shown to be

²⁰⁰ 'Toni Morrison: Interview' (1993), in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, p. 359.

gendered. In effect, there has often been a consensus that, given women's frequent (mythically defined) commitment to other tasks such as housework and the raising of children, they are by definition incapable of mobilising the exclusive commitment to art a genius life demands.²⁰¹ In other words, given that the roles of procreator and genius tend to be seen as opposed categories, there is a common belief that they simply cannot be combined. As such, the feminist Nicole Ward Jouve warns women who want to be both writers and mothers: 'The work is a needy infant. The Muse is a demanding mistress. She loves celibates. Commands that her devotees choose which offspring they best love: of the body, or the mind? There only are twenty-four hours to each day. Can you give all to both?',²⁰²

This misleading belief²⁰³ appears to have frequently been used to discourage women from the pursuit of both art and motherhood. Tillie Olson, for instance, recounts in her work *Silences* how Thomas Mann's daughter (who had ambitions to become a musician) was told by her psychoanalyst: 'You must choose between your art and fulfillment as a woman, between music and family life'.²⁰⁴ Comparably, the writer Alice Walker explains in her essay 'One Child of One's Own - A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)' how she internalised similar notions, making her experience the following doubts after the birth of her daughter:

²⁰¹ This is a highly complicated matter. On the one hand, as the previous section has argued, the many hours women spend on these tasks seem to have often formed real obstacles for women's creative development. At the same time, this does not mean – when facing the vast variety of women's lives and circumstances – that all women in more traditional roles have been a priori incapable of mobilising the necessary time and energy to become creatively active. The complexity of the matter, then, lies in the fact that – with reference to individual lives – both aspects need to be seriously considered.

²⁰² Ward Jouve, *Female Genesis*, p. 166.

²⁰³ The example of Morrison already suggests that being a writer and a mother may add some difficulties to a literary career, but is evidently a feasible undertaking.

²⁰⁴ Analyst of Thomas Mann's daughter, quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 31.

Well, I wondered, with great fear, where is the split in me now? What is the damage? Was it true, as ‘anonymous’ – so often a woman with distressing observations – warned: ‘Women have not created as fully as men because once she has a child a woman cannot give herself to her work the way a man can...etc, etc?’ Was I, as a writer, done for?²⁰⁵

Both examples – one an external encounter with a masculine voice, the other a display of internalised prohibitions probably put forth by women themselves – illustrate how this misrepresentative element of the genius plot can seriously affect and discourage (potentially) creative women. Instead (and as we shall see) they are encouraged to exclusively take on the alternative mythical roles provided for them.

Interestingly, following a dynamic that will be explored in more detail in the subsequent chapter, it seems that the idea of ultimate commitment has also affected the very reception of women writers who were mothers. Even though one here necessarily moves onto somewhat more hypothetical ground, it appears as if many female writers with children have often been excluded from the canon in part *because* their existence as mothers is regarded as incompatible with full artistic commitment, thus making their work of suspect literary value.

To name an example of this, the prolific and, in her own times, extremely popular novelist Margaret Oliphant often seems to have been dismissed on the basis of having children and – to add to her lack of adherence to the genius pattern – the fact that she financially supported them through her writing. Indeed,

²⁰⁵ Walker, ‘*One Child of One’s Own*’, p. 126.

scholars on this author have shown that ‘despite her wide popularity in the nineteenth century’ there was a later consensus that ‘the rapid production and sheer volume of Oliphant's writings’ – largely caused by her need to support her children – ‘prevented her from composing any work of lasting literary distinction’.²⁰⁶ What is more, Virginia Woolf in her famous work *Three Guineas* actually uses Oliphant as an example of the quintessential ‘bad writer’. In an evident relation to the fact that Oliphant’s literary motivations are not entirely ‘pure’, Woolf accuses her of no less than ‘writing those books, lectures and articles by which culture is prostituted and intellectual liberty sold into slavery.’²⁰⁷

Although notably disguised in a rhetoric above all alluding to her financial motivation, one cannot help hypothesising that Oliphant’s work is a priori suspect because, as a mother, she could not have been exclusively committed to her literary vocation. In fact, it seems that anti-commercial and ‘anti-maternal’ prejudices here come to reconfirm each other, emphasising the non-genius nature of Oliphant’s writing quite regardless of her actual work.

Geniuses are proven right in the end

Moving on to a final – and again connected – inaccurate and profoundly gendered element of the genius plot, there is also the idea that true geniuses ‘endure’, their works being eventually ‘proven right’ through their achievement of a kind of literary immortality.

²⁰⁶ ‘Margaret (Oliphant Wilson) Oliphant Criticism’, *Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism*, www.enotes.com, Gerald R. Barterian, Denise Evans, Mary L. Onorato (eds.), 1998, <<http://www.enotes.com/nineteenth-century-criticism/oliphant-margaret-oliphant-wilson>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed July 2010.

²⁰⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 288.

If this notion has already been shown to be misrepresentative in Chapter Two, where artistic reception has instead been outlined as a man-made and highly relative phenomenon, let us turn straight away to its underlying gendering. The latter, then, seems to mainly emerge through the fact that a belief in an ultimately just and infallible literary history once more – albeit on a different level – ends up obscuring the true factors behind the absence of women's work from the literary canon and genius lists.

We have already briefly looked at several obstacles which have led to the impossibility of women writers being included in the genius canon, such as their writing being taken away from them or their many obligations keeping them from successfully finishing work in the first place. At the same time, however (bearing in mind the variety of women's lives), it is of crucial importance to emphasise that women have, of course, always written – and often with great success.

As, unfortunately, this fact still has not fully been incorporated into the body of received (literary) knowledge, one may here point to some basic examples of this. In her study *Women Writers in English Literature*, the theorist Jane Stevenson shows how already during the Middle Ages, many women associated with the church were highly literary active. Still – in a cyclically gendered logic latter incorporated into the genius myth – many of these writings have not been preserved precisely because, being written by women, they were regarded as by definition trivial, unimportant and uninteresting.²⁰⁸

In addition, and as will be addressed in the subsequent section, many theorists such as Dale Spender have also begun to point to women's pioneering

²⁰⁸ Stevenson, *Women Writers in English Literature*, p. 7.

role with regard to the rise of the novel. As such, the scholar's classic *Mothers of the Novel – 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* goes into some detail to outline the vast historical contributions of women to the lengthy prose genre, especially in its emerging days.

But there are sheer countless examples of women who were celebrated in their own time, only for their contributions to eventually fade into literary oblivion. By now, many of these have begun to be recovered through personal and institutional initiatives, with Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* acting as a prominent instance of the former, the vast data bases of women writing provided by Penn University Pennsylvania²⁰⁹ and the Women Writer's Project at Brown University²¹⁰ of the latter. Also, for several decades now, all-women publishing houses such as Virago have been dedicated to producing new editions of many of these and other female writers. Nevertheless, apart from the striking fact that the vast majority of them have *still* not been incorporated into the canon, virtually all of them had originally been all but wiped out by literary history.

Now, this deletion has many gendered reasons in its own right, many of which will become addressed in the following chapter and this thesis as a whole. What is most important at the moment is that the often profoundly gendered causes behind their exclusion become precisely obscured by the genius assumption that, if only they had been worthwhile, these works would have been preserved by posterity. As is evident from Woolf's previously quoted statement about historical female authors who were 'writing the innumerable bad novels

²⁰⁹ Mary Mark Ockerbloom (ed.), 'A Celebration of Women Writing', *Penn Libraries*, <<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/>>, World Wide Web Database, accessed September 2010

²¹⁰ 'Women Writer's Project', *Brown University*, <<http://www.wwp.brown.edu/index.html>>, World Wide Web Database, accessed November 2010.

which have ceased to be recorded even in text-books', the very fact of their deletion thus turns into an indication of their supposedly low literary quality.²¹¹ Again, we are facing the post-hoc logic of the myth whose cyclically destructive impact on female writers becomes almost impossible to break.

Finally, that such reasoning presents by no means a matter of the remote past may be illustrated with respect to the critic Harold Bloom who makes the following comment about feminists' efforts to recovery lost female writers: 'The true test is to find work, whether in the past or present, by women writers that we have undervalued, and thus bring it to our attention...By that test they [feminists] have failed, because they have added not one to the canon.'²¹² Strikingly, we here also see the cyclical genius logic used to actively diminish the cultural impact of many 'lost' female writers' rediscovery, potentially such a strong argument against the discriminative moral of the genius tale.

3.4. Pushing women out

Let us end this chapter by analysing the hypothesis that the masculine myth actually stepped in precisely at a time when (during the rise of the novel) women were starting to emerge far more prominently than before, in order to push them behind new, ideological, boundaries. In other words, it will be argued that consciously and/or subconsciously, a mythology already shown to have been deeply masculine from its very origins became increasingly drawn upon to (re-) establish the normative creator as male.

Of course, it would be absurd to suggest that this was the *only* reason why the myth of genius arose during that particular period in history. We have already

²¹¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* p. 84.

²¹² 'Harold Bloom: Interview' (1991), in *The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol. 2, p. 329.

briefly mentioned how – among many other complex elements – it acted as a cultural response to the advent of the Industrial Revolution and an artistic reaction against the strict rules and norms of Neoclassicism.

What is more, and in many ways related to the former, it is important to remember that the pre-romantic period of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in many ways saw the rise of the commercial artist and writer. Prescott comments with regard to this in her work *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740*: ‘This period in history is commonly acknowledged to mark the first substantial development of a commercial literary marketplace and a culture of professional authorship.’²¹³ As hinted, the idea of genius is decidedly anti-commercial in its orientation, regarding lack of interest in financial remuneration as one of the essential features of its protagonist and often considering a work’s commercial success as incompatible with its potential genius status. Consequently, it seems evident enough that such a strongly anti-commercial notion sprang up at least partly as a reaction to this new tendency within the literary world.

However, it has also been mentioned that during that same period, women were also beginning to play a very significant role within that new literary market place, especially with regard to the genre so central to this thesis, the novel. As such, the historian Ian Watt, states in his work *The Rise of the Novel* that, in England, ‘The majority of eighteenth-century novels were actually written by women’.²¹⁴ Moreover – and this is a strikingly underemphasised aspect of literary history – there is sufficient evidence to suggest that women were the actual pioneers of this emerging genre. One may here particularly

²¹³ Sarah Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 86.

²¹⁴ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 298.

highlight three women writers, namely the previously mentioned Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood and Delarivier Manley – referred to, in their own times, as the ‘Fair Triumvirate of Wit’.²¹⁵

All three of them, first of all, stand out because they wrote novels at exceptionally early dates. Whereas literary history is quite fond of regarding Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) as the ‘first novel’, Behn’s short novel against slavery, *Oroonoko* was actually published as early as 1688. Manley followed suit with her works on contemporary political scandals such as *The New Atalantis* (1709) and *The Adventures of Rivella, or the History of the Author of The New Atalantis* (1714). Eliza Haywood’s first novel *Love in Excess or The Fatal Enquiry* came out between 1719 and 1720, followed by an immense literary oeuvre estimated to amount to over seventy works.

Naturally, there were not *only* women among the earliest novelists; one must not forget that Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* was, for instance, also already published in 1719. Nevertheless, it is crucial to observe quite how significantly many works by female authors preceded and eventually coincided with the emergence of male novelists such as precisely Defoe, Richardson or Fielding whom we now commonly regard as the genius ‘fathers’ (note the persistence of the first use of the word genius as a spirit dedicated to paternity) of the genre.

Furthermore, the ‘triumvirate of wit’ were also by no means a half-noticed literary undercurrent; they were immensely popular, widely read and well-known. To illustrate this, we may, for example, point to Henry Fielding’s reference to Haywood in one of his plays as ‘Mrs. Novel’. Also, in 1724, Haywood had her complete *Works* published in four volumes, a sign during this

²¹⁵ Incidentally, this is also a gendered title, as a ‘virate’ refers to a male group in power.

time that her writing was not only extremely well-liked, but also of ‘canonical appeal’.²¹⁶

Indeed, these authors’ prominence (and that of other female novelists) was so strong, that – as Spender remarks in her study *Mothers of the Novel* – ‘in the late eighteenth century...men had used female pseudonyms to try and find a favoured way into print.’²¹⁷ This *feminine* emphasis of the early novel also becomes evident from many of the supposedly pioneering works by men, with their tendency (such as Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, or indeed Richardson’s *Pamela*) to focus on the lives and struggles of women, recounted from a female point of view.

There were, of course, several factors which contributed to this prominence of women with regard to the novel. Among others, one must bear in mind that, in its beginnings, this narrative form was far removed from the high cultural standing granted to the ‘serious’ novel today. This relatively low status – in a cyclically gendered logic in many ways preceding that eventually chartered by the genius myth – seemed to have been both due to its association with women and allowed for more women to contribute to its formation and growth.

In addition, and in direct connection to the above, we have also already alluded to the relative openness of the novel in comparison to other art forms and literary genres, requiring far less financial input and formal education. Thirdly, there was actually an increase in *basic* education for women in the period preceding and coinciding with the rise of the novel,²¹⁸ thus equipping many females with the necessary tools – above all literacy – to actually engage with the

²¹⁶ See Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture*, pp. 72-3.

²¹⁷ Spender, *Mothers of the Novel*, p. 4.

²¹⁸ As the scholar Stevenson explains, the beginning of the seventeenth century showed a significant increase of girl’s schools in England. Stevenson, *Women Writers in English Literature*, p. 48.

genre, either as writers or readers. The latter already leads to the fourth (if by no means conclusive) point that, for a variety of reasons such as an arising middle class with more leisure time, especially for women²¹⁹ – the reading public of the novel was indeed predominantly *female*. All of these factors, then, go a long way to explain why – at this particular period in time and within this particular genre – women could make their entrance upon the literary field with such force.

Given these major changes (i.e. the emergence of the writer as a commercial and frequently *female* figure), the psychological reasons for the increased usage of the concept of ‘genius’, with such a deep masculine coding and profound anti-commercial core become far more understandable. In fact, we may here remember the statement by Malinowski quoted, in part, during the first chapter of this thesis and now to be cited in full. Namely that ‘myth functions especially where there is a social strain, such as in matters of great difference in rank and power, matters of precedence and subordination, and unquestionably where profound historical changes have taken place.’²²⁰ What we see is that the myth of genius in effect began to develop its impact during a period of crucial historical changes and where, due to the increased presence of women within the literary field, the established dominance of men came under considerable ‘strain’.

To finish this section, let us provide some further evidence for this claim. Firstly, let us turn once more to the writer Eliza Haywood, who became the

²¹⁹ Interestingly, Watt observes with regard to this: ‘The distribution of leisure of the period supports and amplifies the picture already given of the composition of the reading public; and it also supplies the best evidence available to explain the increasing part in it played by women readers. For, while many of the nobility and gentry continued their cultural regress from the Elizabethan courtier to Arnold’s “Barbarians”, there was a parallel tendency for literature to become a primarily feminine pursuit.’ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 43. Note Watt’s own remarkable gender bias as subtly illustrated by his comparison of literature as an increasingly female interest to the ‘cultural regress’ of courtiers to Barbarians.

²²⁰ Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, pp. 59-60.

victim of several explicit literary attacks²²¹ and was powerfully derided by Alexander Pope in his work *The Dunciad*. Here, the poet not only makes much of the fact that Haywood was a mother,²²² but actually features her as a figure given away as a second prize for a pissing contest and described as: ‘yon Juno of majestic size/With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes’ (II.155-6).²²³

Two points may be highlighted about this quote. To begin with, Prescott argues that this act of public derision (which appears to be more frequently remembered than Haywood’s actual novels) was very much motivated by the very fact that Haywood, like Pope a few years earlier, had had her *Works* published, thus becoming a literary rival to be diminished.²²⁴ Moreover, we notice how this successful attempt to smudge Haywood’s reputation becomes, indeed, expressed in subtle genius terms. For apart from the other grotesque and derogatory female imagery deployed (e.g. ‘cow-like udders’) Pope refers to Haywood precisely as Juno. This, as we have seen, is not only the female counter-image to the Roman genius, but also an allusion to the prominent figure of Juno in Virgil’s *Aeneid* – one of the work’s chief antagonists, intent on placing obstacles into the hero’s path. Clearly then, we see how, subtly yet powerfully, the masculine genius imagery becomes deployed to push a mythical female antagonist out of a male writer’s way.

²²¹ To name a few more examples of this phenomenon, Jonathan Swift referred to Haywood as a ‘stupid, infamous, scribbling woman’ and the Earl of Egmont called her a ‘Whore in her youth, a bawd in her elder years, and a writer of lewd novels, wherein she succeeded tolerably well.’ Swift and Egmont, quoted in Linda Robinson Walker, ‘Love’s Pow’rful Queen’, *Michigan Today*, June 1994 [consulted at <<http://www.ns.umich.edu/MT/94/Jun94/mt11j94b.html>> (accessed July 2010)].

²²² He mentions ‘Two babes of love close clinging to her waist’ (II.157-8), arguably in a further attempt to diminish her literary standing and reputation. Alexander Pope *The Dunciad*, quoted in Robinson Walker, ‘Love’s Pow’rful Queen’.

²²³ Pope, Alexander, *The Dunciad* – Book II, *ebooks@Adelaide* [consulted at <<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pope/alexander/dunciad/book2.html>> (accessed July 2010)].

²²⁴ Prescott argues that ‘Pope’s derogatory portrait of Haywood can also be seen as a reaction to the claims for canonical authorial status suggested by the publication of her *Works*.’ Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture*, p. 73.

Another example of this complex process to explicitly or implicitly deploy the genius idea to push women out may be found in an anonymous introduction to the novelist Penelope Aubin's work. Often believed to have been written by Samuel Richardson as a means of paving the way for the publication *Pamela*,²²⁵ this text praises Aubin for 'preserving that Purity of Style and Manner' in her fiction, unlike other female writers of her time (a probable allusion precisely to Behn, Haywood and Manley) who are 'like fallen Angels'.²²⁶

In effect, it is implied that these women have given the novel its bad name:

If these, among others that might be enumerated, may be said to be the indispensable Requisites of a good Novel, we must confess, with Concern, that they have been too seldom observed by those who have undertaken this species of Writing, insomuch that it has brought a Disreputation on the very Name. And we are still more sorry to have Reason to say, That those of the Sex, who have generally wrote on these Subjects, have been far from preserving that Purity of Style and Manners, which is the greatest Glory of a fine Writer on any Subject.²²⁷

Here, then, the female pioneers of the genre begin to be dismissed on the basis of a supposed lack of quality (not observing the 'indispensable Requisites of a good Novel') and to become identified with an overall category of 'bad writing' (and,

²²⁵ Prescott observes with regard to this introduction that 'this may be an attempt by Richardson to pave the way for the publication of *Pamela*'. Prescott, *Women, Authorship and Literary Culture*, p. 86.

²²⁶ Anonymous (suspected to be Samuel Richardson) quoted in *ibid.*, p. 83.

²²⁷ *Id.*

of course, the figure of the ‘bad writer’) against which good authorship may be defined. Although the dismissal is here not presented in explicit ‘genius’ terms, we may nonetheless note the attempt to raise the hierarchical status of the genre and to indirectly prepare the eventual notion of men like Richardson as its most significant ‘genius’ pioneers by criticising the contributions of previous female authors.²²⁸

As a third example of this seeming urge to diminish female influence on the genre of the novel and define at least its most praiseworthy examples in masculine, ‘genius’ terms, one may name the end of eighteenth-century treatise ‘Of History and Romance’ by the novelist and theorist William Godwin. Whereas Godwin’s main argument hovers around the potential superiority of the novel (‘Romance’) over historical writing, it is clear that – as Siskin comments in his work *The Work of Writing* – in order to assume such an elevated status, the novel has to firstly be washed clear off its female associations.²²⁹ As such, Godwin not only complains about the ‘scum and surcharge’²³⁰ of the masses of novels written for ‘women and boys’, he also explicitly argues for the superiority of works which treat ‘the development of great genius, or the exhibition of bold and masculine virtues.’²³¹

²²⁸ Incidentally, in 1759 (twenty years after this introduction came out) Young published his famous treatise ‘Conjectures on Original Composition’ – so crucial on the formation and dispersion of the genius myth – which, apart from only naming male examples for geniuses, is explicitly presented as a letter to no-one other than Richardson himself. As is stated at the very beginning of the work: ‘IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR OF Sir CHARLES GRANDISON [Richardson]’, Young, ‘Conjectures on Original Composition’.

²²⁹ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing – Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830* (London and Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 170-1.

²³⁰ William Godwin ‘Of History and Romance’, [consulted at <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/godwin.history.html>> (accessed December 2010)].

²³¹ Id.

What these examples thus illustrate is indeed an increasing (if subtle) trend to use the genius mythology to drive women into the role of the literary antagonist against which the outstanding male novelists may define themselves. That this – among other measures to push women into the ‘abject’²³² – seems to have been a successful approach is pointed out by Dale Spender in *Mothers of the Novel*. For remembering the tendency that during the eighteenth century ‘men writers had used female pseudonyms...by the 1840s the practice had been reversed, and women writers were adopting male pseudonyms in order to find a publisher.’²³³ Slowly – and aided by the myth of genius – as the novel rose in status, the male novelist became the cultural norm.

3.5. Conclusion

During this chapter, it has therefore been shown that both the mythical pattern for the genius character and plot are deeply masculine in their gendering. As a result, the former seems to help set up a mythical image of the genius writer as male, defining a variety of complementary mythical roles for women in which they inevitably end up as an ‘other’ to the normative category of the masculine author.

With regard to the gendered genius plot, this appears to assist in a cyclical perpetuation of these roles as well as the general bias against women writers presented as the myth’s narrative moral, providing several justifications for the continued assertion that women lack the inherent ability to produce outstanding

²³² Here, one example may be the common comparison of female writers to prostitutes – another measure which frequently tainted their latter reception. As is, for instance, asked in the introduction to Haywood’s *Fantomina and Other Works*: ‘Why did Haywood drop out of literary history? ... Certainly the fact that Haywood was an exceptionally prolific, well-known, and best-selling woman writer – at a time when female authorship was widely considered to be the literary equivalent to prostitution – goes a long way toward explaining her temporary eclipse.’ ‘Introduction’, in Eliza Haywood *Fantomina and Other Works*, Alexander Pettit, Margaret Case Croskery, Anna C. Patchias (eds.) (Plymouth, Sydney: Broadview Literary Texts, 2004), p. 9.

²³³ Spender, *Mothers of the Novel*, p. 4.

works of art. Indeed, one may go so far as to claim that these elements have contributed to the fact that we have been left with what may be called a ‘wrong’ literary history, in some ways based on the false notion that women have not notably contributed to its ultimate course and wealth of creations.

Finally, the third section of this chapter has illustrated how the myth of genius seems to have, in many ways, sprung up as a direct reaction to an increased presence of women writers during the rise of the novel, as a conscious as well as a subliminal attempt to push back their literary advances. As such, and in clear adherence to some of Malinowski’s most basic charter definitions, the myth of genius becomes called upon in times of social change and strain to (re)enforce a status quo of masculine domination onto the new genre of the novel and over the arts as a whole.

In the subsequent chapter, we will now turn to the intrinsically related matter of the outward effect of the genius myth. As the process is cyclical, this will include both new elements and a revisiting of some aspects already discussed, analysing them further and crucially adding to their revelations of the way the gendered myth has worked outwardly to re-affirm itself and discriminate, collectively and individually, against women writers.

Chapter Four: Outward Effects of the Genius Myth

4.1. Introduction

Having thus looked at the profoundly gendered nature both of the genius character and plot pattern and how they help to create and confirm the narrative moral of the charter myth, it is time to focus in more detail on some of the outward effects of both the masculinity of the genius mould and the negative view on women writing the myth inscribes.

In order to illustrate these aspects, Section 4.2., 'Channelling away', will start off by glancing at the common outward effect of the gendered genius myth to mythically channel many women from the task of writing into other roles more directly coherent with the specifically female parts the character patterns prescribe. Following on from this Section 4.3., 'Bias self-confirmed', will analyse the way the masculine imagery of the genius myth seems to directly interfere with the process of literary judgment, thus constantly re-establishing the notion of the inferior female and superior male writer. Section 4.4., 'Systemising bias', will then look at the way the discrimination of female writing has often been further perpetuated through a subtly gendered hierarchy of literary content and the lack of reactions to women's work in reviews. Finally, Section 4.5., 'Re-enforcing mythical bias', will focus on several cultural practices such as the involvement of readers' and gatekeepers' status in value judgments and implicit and explicit attacks on women writers which may be regarded as actively strengthening the narrative moral of the genius myth. Indeed, especially the latter seems to act as the literary equivalent of a basic charter myth operation Malinowski describes: 'Should there arise land-quarrels, encroachment in

magical matters, fishing rights, or other privileges the testimony of myth would be referred to.’²³⁴ Given that any female writing may be regarded as a potential threat to the myth’s narrative moral, such attacks can therefore be interpreted as a manner in which such menaces are minimised, and the status quo of male superiority is, once again, affirmed.

On the whole, then, what will emerge is that it is through largely *identifying* great authors in relation to the myth of genius that it comes to outwardly function as a Malinowskian charter tale, constantly (to quote from the first chapter) ‘encoding, enhancing and perpetuating a perceived supremacy of male creators.’

Given that the inward effects of the genius myth form the core concern of this thesis, the discussion of its outward repercussions will be considerably shorter and less detailed. It predominantly strives to present an overview of some of the ideology’s key external operations, thus providing a necessary backdrop against which its psychological workings can subsequently be comprehended in their full (cyclical) complexity.

4.2. Channelling away

As has been implied, one of the crucial outward effects of the genius tale seems to be that – as both society and individuals often appear to rely on mythical categories for inward and outward identification – women are frequently channelled into their complementary roles, such as particularly that of the ‘helpmate’. Men, on the other hand, tend to take on either more direct genius parts or other eminent positions within the literary system.

²³⁴ Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, p. 39.

This previously mentioned ‘mythical division of labour’ seems to be so common that *Observer Book of Genius* actually contains a separate section on ‘Women Behind Genius’ which, for instance, refers to Nabukov’s wife in the following terms: ‘His wife, Vera, was his editor, agent, business manager, typist, proof-reader, chauffeur and would even cut up his food.’²³⁵ Indeed, literary history is all but replete with examples of women actually living the mythically prescribed role of the ‘helpmate’ to a male genius. As such, Thomas Mann’s wife states that: ‘My portion was to see to it that he [her husband] had the best circumstances for his work’.²³⁶ Similarly, Sonya Tolstoy ceaselessly copied and edited her husband’s writing.²³⁷

What strikes one as particularly interesting about some of these cases is that several women in question not only had (unfulfilled) literary aspirations of their own, but also seem to have willingly and even proudly consented to their fulfilment of a subordinate helpmate role. This phenomenon is, for instance, analysed by Spender, who comments with regard to Sonya Tolstoy:

one reason she [Sonya] was capable of becoming central to her husband’s work was that she had literary aptitudes and aspirations of her own. Not that she was ready to put her own talents to the test. She was young and, by her own admission, had much to learn. So she felt content, even

²³⁵ Wilkinson, *The Observer Book of Genius*, p. 20.

²³⁶ Katia Mann, quote in Olson, *Silences*, p. 218.

²³⁷ As Dale Spender states with regard to Sonya Tolstoy in her work *The Writing or the Sex*: ‘Apart from running the home and the estate she took on the task of making a full and fair copy of her husband’s work...She ceaselessly copied, corrected and edited, and yet for her considerable creative contribution she has received little credit; not from her husband, not from the world of letters.’ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 164.

honoured, to be allowed to serve someone so great and gifted, someone she judged to be a genius.²³⁸

In effect, as Spender further outlines, there appear to have been numerous cases in which: ‘far from always defending the independence of women’s creativity, and its products, there have been women who have welcomed the artistic interest of men, particularly prominent men. It has even been seen as the high point of their lives.’²³⁹

Although each case is, of course, complex in its own right, one may suppose that this phenomenon of consensual assistance can be at least partly related to the mythical allure also inherent in the female counter-parts. In other words, these women may have been attracted by the idea of forming part of the myth’s ‘higher order’, if only in a subordinate position. In this manner, then, they were successfully channelled away from potentially taking up more active literary roles and acting as ‘geniuses’ themselves.

Finally, with regard to this particular matter, if one is – once again – tempted to believe that this role division is by now a thing of the past, we may refer to a quote by the more contemporary novelist John Gardner who openly talks about his creative process in the following manner:

If I have any doubt about what a character would say or a room would look like, I ask my wife...My writing involves these two imaginations [his and his wife’s] in a very deep way, page after page after page...It informs everything I do. Perhaps I should have used ‘John and Joan

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

Gardner' on the titles all along; I may do this in the future. But in modern times such a work is regarded as not really art.²⁴⁰

Apart from a need to present art in accordance to the genius myth's definition of it (to be further explored in a moment), the woman is clearly shown to contribute to the man's art, without – however – taking on the role of (or being given credit as) an active creator herself.

If many potential female writers thus appear to have been mythically channelled into becoming assistants to authors rather than authors in their own right, a similar phenomenon may still be observed on a larger scale within our contemporary, literary industry. As theorist Janet White explores in her essay 'The Writing on the Wall - Beginning or End of a Girl's Career?',²⁴¹ the literary world seems to still predominantly employ women in professional equivalents to the mythical helpmate role, whereas men – as has been hinted – appear to more readily take on the parts of eminent writers or senior gate-keeping positions as literary critics, reviewers, top editors and so on.

Interestingly, this observation may be backed up through several studies, such as the analysis of women's representation on review pages *Reviewing the Reviews* conducted by Women in Publishing, or various statistics presented by Lee Bollinger and Carole O'Neill in their work *Women in Media Careers - Success Despite the Odds*. The former – to be looked at in more detail later on –

²⁴⁰ Gardner quoted in Olson, *Silences*, pp. 221-2.

²⁴¹ Janet White, 'The Writing on the Wall - Beginning or End of a Girl's Career?', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 9.5-6 (1986), pp. 561-574.

reveals that there tend to be significantly fewer female than male reviewers.²⁴² In the latter, Bollinger and O'Neill provide a statistical analysis compiled in 1999 by the Association of American Publishers which shows that 'in six major publishing houses, 70.9 of the editorial staff were women, 78.2 of entry management were women, but only 28.9 percent of executive senior management were women.'²⁴³ Even though the authors of *Women in Media Careers* do grant that there has been some improvement since the survey was conducted, they nevertheless conclude that even in 2008 – the work's year of publication: 'Book publishing...remains a media venue where the glass ceiling is firmly in place for executives and authors, and it may be only with luck and much perseverance that a woman could climb to the CEO level in the industry.'²⁴⁴

Hence, as these examples suggest, women tend to be lastingly channelled into (and actually dominate) the 'helpmate' roles within the literary industry, yet remain strikingly underrepresented when it comes to positions holding the greatest power. This, as will be shown, seems to help maintain the impact of the genius myth's narrative moral, for – arguably, through a mechanism to be discussed – there are not enough women in strong gate keeping positions to topple over some of the notion's gendered assumptions from within the system itself.

²⁴²Women in Publishing, *Reviewing the Reviews - A Woman's Place on the Book* (London: Journeyman, 1987), p. 30.

²⁴³Lee Bollinger, Carole O'Neill, *Women in Media Careers - Success Despite the Odds* (Lanham, Plymouth: University Press of America, 2008), p. 37.

²⁴⁴Ibid., p. 40.

4.3. Bias self-confirmed

With regard to women who do actively take up the pen, the perhaps most crucial effect of the genius notion (as has already begun to be manifested in the previous part, especially with reference to Oliphant and Haywood) appears to be that the existing bias against women creators inscribed in the myth seems to simply impose itself on the process of artistic evaluation, often confirming itself regardless of the particular work in question.

This may be described to operate in the following manner. Whereas – as has been discussed – the genius view presents artistic judgment as an orderly phenomenon where a particularly perceptive reader recognises the profound, inherent value of a work, it seems that the romantic ideology actually becomes frequently deployed as a conscious or subconscious guide to such evaluative processes. In other words, rather than merely appraising a creative product independently of its context or circumstances of creation, an artist's adherence to the mythical character and plot pattern appears to be commonly used as an indication of the ultimate worth of an artistic product.

This process – here with reference to a person's already existent genius status and the field of visual arts – is, for instance, remarked upon by the creativity scholar Arthur Koestler. In his classic analysis of creativity, *The Act of Creation*, the theorist tells the story of a friend who significantly changed her opinion of a painting once she found out it was a Picasso, therefore relying not on her own (initial) opinion but on the artist's eminent status for the evaluation of it.²⁴⁵ Of course, within the field of literature, we also recognise an acknowledgment of this process in the previous quote by John Gardner, who

²⁴⁵ As Koestler explains with regard to his friend's perception of the work: 'she *saw* it differently since she knew that it was done by Picasso himself and "not just a reproduction"...She honestly believed to be guided by purely aesthetic value-judgments' Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, p. 403.

decides not to make the collaborative nature of his novels too public because ‘such a work is regarded as not really art’.²⁴⁶

In both cases, then, it is actually our knowledge of the creators – and their compliance with a genius conception of creativity – which is recognised as actively influencing our supposedly disinterested appraisal of a work. As was discussed with reference to Teske’s theory on mythical perception, it seems that the pattern of genius indeed directly *imposes* itself – at least partly – on the kind of evaluations we make. Great artists become largely identified with reference to the mythical pattern of genius.

Now, what is especially interesting for this thesis is the ever more clearly emerging fact that, given the gendered nature of this plot and character pattern, the notion that a work was written by a woman may be regarded as directly at odds with its potential genius status. That is to say that, among the features of the author assessed in order to orient a hypothesis about a work’s value, the latter’s sex seems to become a distinctive and crucial feature, with masculinity a priori implying a potentially higher literary value than an author’s – by definition opposed to genius – femininity.

Having therefore outlined this phenomenon’s basic theory, let us look at some evidence in the form of specific historical and contemporary examples.

²⁴⁶ As to our reliance on genius elements to identify ‘great’ authors, one might add a personal anecdote of attending a talk by the Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel. During this event, my high opinion of her and her famous *Like Water for Chocolate* underwent a sudden shock when she declared that she used to be far more interested in the medium of film than in novels and started on her acclaimed bestseller because writing struck her as a far cheaper enterprise. Hence, my opinion of her *work* illogically suffered because it clashed with our mythical conception of serious authors as called, ultimately dedicated to their work and entirely removed from financial concerns.

The Goldberg experiment

One of the perhaps most well-known proofs for the existence of a cyclically continued prejudice against female authors and the way this influences the actual appraisal of their work, is a manuscript experiment conducted by the scholar Philip Goldberg during the seventies. Here, a set of articles from different – both traditionally masculine and feminine – fields were sent out for evaluation, each piece of writing sometimes presented with a female, at others with a male name.²⁴⁷ Strikingly, the results of this study were that writing believed to be produced by men was continually perceived as intrinsically better than that ascribed to women.²⁴⁸ Or, with specific reference to the experiment: ‘manuscripts by John T McKay were consistently judged as cleverer, better, superior in every way to identical manuscripts by Joan T McKay.’²⁴⁹ As this example already shows, rather than judging the work in question, it seems that the persona of the writer (arguably relying on the prescriptive maleness of eminent creators as inscribed in the genius myth) is taken as a self-affirming indicator of quality. Femininity, on the other hand, appears to be interpreted a priori as a sign of inferior value.

Changed (re)views

Another example of the gendered myth of genius directly affecting the reception of women writers may be detected in the frequent occurrence of changed reviews once it becomes revealed that a particular work has been produced by a woman.

²⁴⁷ See experiment discussion, Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 13.

²⁴⁸ It is interesting to add that this experiment was conducted solely among women, thus implying that our biases against female writing seem to be reproduced by both sexes, as part of the overall, cultural status quo.

²⁴⁹ Debbie Taylor, ‘Three Cures for Mslexia’, *Mslexia Magazine*, 28 (January/February/March 2006) [consulted at <http://www.mslexia.co.uk/magazine/features/agenda_1.php> (accessed January 2009)].

Given the common historical practice of female authors publishing their writings under a male pseudonym, this is a phenomenon fairly easy to demonstrate and trace.

In her essay 'Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics', the scholar Carol Ohmann, for instance, analyses the changes of *Wuthering Heights*' reception once it became revealed that the novel was not actually written by a man (as Brontë's pseudonym, Ellis Bell, had been taken to imply), but by a female author. Ohmann shows that when the novel was first reviewed and considered to be a man's creation, it was, on the whole, 'declared to be powerful and original'.²⁵⁰ Also, despite acknowledging that it contained some rather disturbing elements, several reviews 'allowed the novel to be the work of a promising, possibly a great, new writer'.²⁵¹ With regard to the second edition of the novel, however, and once the true (female) identity of the author became known, Ohmann makes the following observation:

There are not so many reviews to the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*. But there are enough, I think, to show that...critical responses to it changed. Where the novel had been called again and again 'original' in 1847 and 1848, the review in the *Athenaeum* began by firmly placing it in a familiar class, and that class was not in the central line of literature.²⁵²

That is to say that, arguably, once *Wuthering Heights* was revealed to be written by an author who lacked one crucial genius feature – maleness – it was no longer

²⁵⁰ Carol Ohmann 'Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics', in Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory – A Reader* (Oxford, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 71.

²⁵¹ Id.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 72.

approached in the genius terms of ‘originality’, but rather placed within the inferior collective of female writing.

Let us add two more instances of this common occurrence, namely those of the previously mentioned novelists George Eliot and Elisabeth Gaskell. As to the former, when Eliot was thought to be a man, she was – among other favourable reviews – praised to be ‘a gentleman of high church tendencies’.²⁵³ Once known to be a woman, however, she received criticism for her work containing ‘a good deal of coarseness, which it is unpleasant to think of as the work of a woman’.²⁵⁴ Similarly, with reference to Gaskell, the previously mentioned critic Stevenson reveals:

When *Mary Barton* first came out, anonymously, it was praised by the *Athenaeum* for its tough and fair-minded exposition of class conflict and its understanding of the roots of proletarian resistance. Once the book was known to have been written by a woman, the tone of the critical comment changed; the love story which is one strand of her narrative became the main focus, and the political analysis was suddenly found to be emotional and lacking in objectivity.²⁵⁵

In all of these cases, then, we notice how the writings believed to have been authored by men are judged to be inherently superior to those created by women. Once more the gendering of the genius protagonist and the myth’s narrative moral appear to impose themselves on the very appraisal of literary works, thus becoming cyclically re-confirmed.

²⁵³Reviews of George Eliot quoted in *Women in Publishing, Reviewing the Reviews* p. ix.

²⁵⁴Id.

²⁵⁵Stevenson, *Women Writers English Literature*, p. 102.

Fulfilling her mythical role?

What furthermore emerges on analysing the above examples is the fact that once the female authorship of a novel becomes revealed, it seems to become evaluated with regard to the novelists' adherence to the specifically female roles presented by the myth. In other words, the critical focus often notably shifts onto an assessment of whether or not the writers in question may be regarded as successful (mythical) *women*. This, in turn, not only appears to become a further distraction from the work itself, but may also be regarded as a double bind. For (as we have already seen with regard to the exceptionally exceptional) women authors often end up being criticised either for not being female enough, or the very femininity detected in their writing is implicitly understood as an indication of the inferior status of their work.

In this manner, George Eliot arguably becomes censured for the 'coarseness' of her writing, 'unpleasant to think of as the work of a woman',²⁵⁶ because it clashes with a mythical delicacy expected of women in their more traditional helpmate and procreative roles. Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, on the other hand, becomes downgraded for containing such 'typically female' features as emotionality and subjectivity. In addition, the narrative strand of the love story – associated with the role of the woman as muse, procreator and often seen as marking a hierarchically lower genre because of its connection to women – turns out to be disproportionately highlighted. In both cases, then, one may claim that the authors cease to be evaluated as potential geniuses but chiefly – in a subtle and cyclical affirmation of their inherent inferiority – with regard to their alternative mythical parts prescribed.

²⁵⁶Reviews of George Eliot, p. ix.

Interestingly, if one thinks that such a treatment of women writers is a phenomenon of the past, a number of scholars have researched the occurrence of comparable cases within a more contemporary setting. One example of this is Margaret Atwood who together with her students undertook a study called ‘sexual bias in reviewing’, by which’ – as the novelist explains – ‘we meant not unfavourable reviews, but points being added or subtracted by the reviewer on the basis of the author’s sex and supposedly associated characteristics rather than on the basis of the work itself.’²⁵⁷

To conduct this survey, they wrote to a large number of male and female writers asking whether they had been treated in such a biased manner. They achieved the following, according to Atwood ‘perhaps predictable’, results:

Of the men, none answered Yes, a quarter Maybe, and three quarters No. Of women, half were Yeses, a quarter Maybes and a quarter Nos. The women replying Yes often wrote long, detailed letters, giving instances and discussing their own attitudes. All the men’s letters were short.²⁵⁸

Consequently, whereas some men also reported to have possibly been victims of prejudiced reviews (emphasising once again that male writers can also be confronted with discrimination), this occurrence appears to be far more common among – and more strongly felt by – women.

Before moving onto the next section, let us quickly underline Atwood’s conclusion by providing two contemporary examples of female writers apparently being evaluated in relation to their mythical femininity rather than

²⁵⁷ Margaret Atwood, ‘Paradoxes and Dilemmas - The Woman as a Writer’, in Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, p. 75.

²⁵⁸ Id.

their actual writing. One is an instance (by now rather famous in feminist literature) of the authors Casey Miller and Kate Swift receiving the following review by a male critic on publication of their work *Words and Women*: ‘From the photograph supplied of Miss Casey Miller and Kate Swift, I should judge that neither was sexually very attractive.’²⁵⁹ In a similar manner, albeit in seemingly more positive terms, the contemporary novelist Zoë Fairbairns – on starting her career – received numerous ‘critical’ comments on her being a ‘bright eyed student’ and an ‘attractive brunette.’²⁶⁰

In both cases, the writers indeed appear to be assessed chiefly in terms of their (un)successful, mythical femininity, here with particular emphasis on their looks. This, in turn, may be taken as a crucial part of the female procreative/muse role, where one of the key tasks of women becomes that of being attractive to men. As this goes to show, discriminative practices of evaluating successful womanhood rather than writing, as inscribed in the dual gendering of the genius myth, is clearly not merely a problem belonging to a remote past.

4.4. Systemising bias

Having thus looked at the manner in which the genius view – evidently working within the overall patriarchal system it inscribes – seems to directly affect the reception of women writers, let us now briefly observe how this operative bias also strikes one as having been systemised both through a hierarchical division of themes/genres and the common reception of women in silence.

²⁵⁹ *Reviewing the Reviews*, p. 3.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Hierarchies of content

In effect – and this may, of course, be seen as connected to the mythical figure of woman as the antagonist or ‘bad’ writer – there appears to be a tendency to regard works (and indeed entire genres) concerned with traditionally masculine matters as ‘high’ literature, whereas novels focusing on typically female experience are almost by definition classified as containing less literary value. As the feminist scholar Carol Poston, for instance, explains with reference to this matter: ‘Women’s experiences are not regarded as fully human experiences, so they do not have literary currency – though it need hardly be said that men’s experiences not shared by women have been taken as universal.’²⁶¹

If this is, naturally, once more a complex issue in its own right, this process may be briefly illustrated with regard to a contemporary phenomenon, namely the ‘chick-lit’ genre. In part because of its close associations with femininity, this literary category has fairly recently received countless attacks from both men and women (especially from within feminist quarters). What ‘chick-lit’ is usually being blamed for is a formulaic approach to writing and a perpetuation of a typically patriarchal imagery of women chiefly concerned with such supposedly female obsessions as shopping or ‘finding a man’.

Elizabeth Merrick, editor of a collection of female writing interestingly entitled *This Is Not Chick Lit*, not only refers to it as ‘the pink-covered chick lit genre...-more feet! more purses! more stilettos!’²⁶² but also claims with regard to the presumably formulaic plot of all of its representative novels: ‘To limit our

²⁶¹ Carol H. Poston quoted in Martha Weigle, *Creation and Procreation – Feminist Reflections on Mythologies of Cosmogony and Parturition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 130.

²⁶² Elizabeth Merrick, ‘This Is Not Chicklit – What’s in a Title’, *The Huffington Post*, 10 August 2006 [consulted at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-merrick/this-is-not-chick-lit-wha_b_26838.html> (accessed July 2010)].

narrative about women in the twenty-first century to one ur-myth of a young and fashionable urban quest for a husband isn't simply untrue to the complexity of women's lives today, it's dull after awhile: the stakes are so low.²⁶³ Even more extremely, the novelist Curtis Sittenfield states that 'calling a book *chick lit* is akin to calling a woman a *slut*.'²⁶⁴

Now, two points appear to be of particular interest in connection to this. Firstly, although it would be wrong to claim that works belonging to this controversial genre are entirely free of any patriarchal illustrations of women,²⁶⁵ the criticism levelled at them seems to be strikingly misrepresentative of much of their actual content and thematic preoccupations.

On a thorough reading of a number of novels by two of the most prominent chick-lit authors, Marian Keyes and Sophie Kinsella, what arises within an in effect somewhat standardised focus on young professional women living in an English-speaking metropolis, is arguably a rich analysis of contemporary female concerns. Indeed, even within the relatively small sample of works considered, one encounters a striking variety of themes, such as pregnancy and childbirth,²⁶⁶ the temptations and risks of living within a capitalist system,²⁶⁷ the conflict between women's professional and more traditional

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Curtis Sittenfield, quoted in Rebecca Traister, 'Women's Studies', Salon.com, <http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2005/11/01/chick_lit/index.html>, 1 November 2005, World Wide Web Publication, accessed July 2010.

²⁶⁵ As has been previously illustrated, Sophie Kinsella, for instance, uses the traditional imagery of woman as a muse in her work *Twenties Girl*.

²⁶⁶ Kinsella, Sophie, *Shopaholic and Baby* (London: Black Swan, 2007).

²⁶⁷ As, for instance, Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (re-edition, London: Black Swan, 2009).

roles,²⁶⁸ mortality and loss²⁶⁹ and – with particular relevance to this thesis – the position of women within the literary industry.²⁷⁰

What ultimately arises then, is a certain notion that the bias against this genre may effectively – in a cycle we are by now so familiar with – affirm itself despite the works’ actual content. At the same time, one cannot help presuming that, as implied, one of the reasons for chick-lit’s lowly status and reception of such heavy criticism is related precisely to its strong and explicit femininity. As Rebecca Traister argues in the culture magazine *Salon*:

the urge to condemn chick lit is also born of a shame about our own femininity...If chick lit chronicles female desire for sex and companionship, there’s nothing dishonest there. We may not all be husband hunting, but would many of us deny that a quest for love is a part of our lives?...Of course we don’t want to be reduced to these qualities. But the impulse to reject novels that lay them bare is a form of self-flagellation.²⁷¹

In many ways, what Traister seems to suggest is that – although the chick lit genre may not portray a version of ideal, entirely emancipated womanhood – it addresses a number of issues which appear to be of real concern to contemporary women and their lives. However – and here the traditional genius ideology and some feminists seem to strangely push similarly restrictive conclusions – such ‘traditional femininity’ becomes ultimately downgraded, whether as

²⁶⁸ Kinsella, Sophie, *The Undomestic Goddess* (re-edition, London: Black Swan, 2009).

²⁶⁹ Marian Keyes, *Anybody out There?* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

²⁷⁰ Marian Keyes, *The Other Side of the Story* (London: Penguin, 2005).

²⁷¹ Traister, ‘Women’s Studies’.

insufficiently progressive or by definition inferior (as argued by the romantic charter myth).

In effect, to further illustrate how chick lit appears to be partly discredited for its association with womanhood – and here we move onto the second point of particular relevance to this discussion – it is also crucial to show how a novel written by a man with comparable content (albeit in masculine terms) may receive a strikingly different and far more positive treatment.

As an example of such an occurrence, let us glance at the fairly recent work *Indecision* by the novelist Benjamin Kunkel which focuses on ‘Dwight Wilmerding – a twenty eight-year-old New Yorker with several roommates, no job or opinions, a listless romantic relationship’²⁷² whose ‘only conviction is that he can find true love with a former crush he hasn’t seen in a decade.’²⁷³ Now – although each book is, of course, individual and it is impossible to find direct equivalents – far from being criticised for reducing the complexity of masculine experience to the ‘ur-myth of a young and fashionable urban quest for a’ wife, the novel has been very favourably received in publications such as *The New York Times Book Review*.²⁷⁴ A comparable content becomes interpreted in a

²⁷² Rebecca Traister, ‘Attack of the Listless Lads’, *Salon.com*, <<http://www.salon.com/books/int/2005/09/20/kunkel/index.html>>, 20 September 2005, World Wide Web Publication, accessed November 2010.

²⁷³ Id.

²⁷⁴ Apart from many other praiseworthy comments about the author, the work is interpreted as a representative of the highly esteemed genre of the ‘Bildungsroman’. As the reviewer, Jay McInerney, comments: ‘Kunkel is deeply aware of the conventions and clichés of the genre - in fact, you get the sense that he’s probably read everything from Goethe’s “Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship” to Alix Ohlin’s recent novel “The Missing Person.” “Indecision” seems at times to have been constructed from a kit in which all the ingredients of the modern American bildungsroman have been laid out methodically and chosen after deep deliberation.’ Jay McInerney, “Indecision” - Getting it Together”, *The New York Times*, 28 August 2005 [consulted at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/28/books/review/28MCINER.html>> (accessed July 2010)].

strikingly different manner, seemingly depending on the sex and gender associations of the author and themes.²⁷⁵

Although here only analysed very succinctly, what we are beginning to face is indeed a notion that male experience has, to recall Poston's words, far more 'literary currency' than traditionally female concerns. The mythical concept of the male genius as the normative (and heroic) creator, as contrasted to women as the writers of bad novels for (female) masses appears to have become further systematised into a hierarchical division of gendered genres and themes.

Ultimately, however – and one here returns to earlier discussions contained by this section – several theorists have argued that it is not always simply the gendering of a literary theme, but once again the sex of the author which chiefly affects its hierarchical classification. To once more quote the novelist Atwood on the matter – and as has become partly evident already through the case of Kunkel's *Indecision*: 'When a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it's realism, when a woman does, it's an unfortunate feminine genetic limitation.'²⁷⁶ Or, as is furthermore claimed in an article on discriminations against women writers, 'Three Cures for Mslexia', published in the magazine for writing women, *Mslexia*:

A Ted Hughes poem about the natural world, or about love, is seen as having a gravitas, a muscularity, not accorded, say, to the poetry of Selima Hill. And Anthony Trollope's painstakingly-observed gossip

²⁷⁵ One may add that, in Kunkel's case, both the white and Harvard educated author and the unworldly hero of his tale conform more directly to the outlines of the myth with its complex gender biases as well as subtle discriminations against those not conforming to its prescriptive upper/middle class, white, maleness. Note that works by working class authors such as Tony Parsons, for instance, are also somewhat pejoratively looked at as 'lad lit'.

²⁷⁶ Atwood, 'Paradoxes and Dilemmas', p. 76.

novels are seen as politically astute, whereas his descendant Joanna's painstakingly-observed gossip novels are disparaged as mere 'Agasagas'.²⁷⁷

We seem to have arrived at a system where both individual works and whole genres seem to have been downgraded – in a cyclical process – through their very association with the anti-genius concept of femininity.

Silence

If the previous examples have, above all, been concerned with the outward effect of genius contributing to a negative reaction to women writers, we now turn to an influence of the myth which – through its powerful subtlety – seems to perhaps most clearly assist its perpetuation. What interests us here is the fact that countless women writers are ultimately not only received through a negative appraisal but often by and in silence. Even though they have managed to speak in a literary form, they simply obtain no or little echo about their work.

This becomes, for instance, evident when remembering the percentages of female representation referred to in this thesis' introduction, where – as far as the category of 'serious literature' is concerned – women are as yet far away from getting their equal share of literary prizes, editions by 'serious' publishing houses and so on. Still, in order to study this matter in more detail, it may be best to look at one of the most illustrative cases of women's continued reception in silence, namely their remarkable underrepresentation on review pages geared towards a general audience.

²⁷⁷ Taylor, 'Three Cures for Mslexia'.

This phenomenon has been analysed by scholars on numerous occasions, its accuracy being confirmed over and over again. As such, one of the most elaborate investigations into women's presence in literary reviews may be found in a piece of research conducted by Women in Publishing and presented in their work *Reviewing the Reviews*.

In order to carry out their study, the group 'monitored twenty eight publications – weeklies, monthlies, newspapers, general magazines and literary reviews – for the year 1985',²⁷⁸ comparing not only the number of review spaces allotted to men and women, but also the size and prominence of the reflective space granted to each.

The findings were arrestingly consistent. Apart from publications specifically oriented towards women (which tend to review more books by women than by men), all supposedly 'general' magazines and newspapers showed a marked male dominance throughout. Indeed, it was discovered that women's magazines were actually more open to reviewing works by both sexes than those publications apparently targeting women and men alike.²⁷⁹

To name some concrete examples of this, let us cite an excerpt from some of the data the study provides:

| | Percentage books by females | Males | Unknown |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------|---------|
| Cosmopolitan | 64. 47 | 31. 58 | 3. 95 |
| Observer | 19. 47 | 74. 62 | 5. 91 |
| Guardian | 17. 77 | 75. 13 | 7. 11 |
| London Review of Books ²⁸⁰ | 16. 57 | 78. 00 | 5. 43 |

²⁷⁸ Women in Publishing, *Reviewing the Reviews*, p. 2.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁸⁰ Id.

What we are facing is, in effect, that prestigious review papers such as *The Observer*, *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books* give less than twenty per cent of their attention to women, whereas the woman's magazine *Cosmopolitan* grants male authors more than thirty per cent of their reviews. In short, one of the obvious conclusions of this survey was that 'any publication that is not specifically aimed at women is tilted towards men.'²⁸¹

Of course, one of the objections that may immediately spring to mind is that this study was conducted more than two decades ago and that things might have radically changed since then. This was, in fact, also the attitude of journalist Jane Mackenzie when recently asked to conduct a similar survey for the magazine *Mslexia*. As she states in an article on her research, called 'Revisiting the Reviews' and published towards the beginning of 2010: 'When *Mslexia* first invited me to investigate the world of book reviewing, I wasn't even entirely convinced that a similar problem [e.g. that of women's relative absence] still existed in the literary review pages.'²⁸²

However, the findings of the previous study²⁸³ were actually re-confirmed; the dominant treatment women writers still seem to receive from general papers is that of silence. Or, in the words of Mackenzie:

The first weekend I sat down with a stack of broadsheet newspapers and counted for myself, I discovered that male authors whose books were given full reviews outnumbered women by a staggering four to one. Just

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁸² Jane Mackenzie, 'Revisiting the Reviews', *Mslexia Magazine*, 44 (January/February/March 2010), p. 8.

²⁸³ It is important to add that Mackenzie's renewed research is a reaction not to the previously mentioned research by Women in Publishing, but to a similar project undertaken by *Mslexia* in 2000, equally confirming the lasting underrepresentation of women.

20 per cent of the books considered worthy of review were by women...Over the next few weeks, the tally of women authors improved a little, drifting back towards a very similar picture to the figures found by the original investigation...But not once did women authors outnumber – or even come close to parity with – the men.²⁸⁴

The underrepresentation of women on review pages is thus a lasting and – as the journalist further outlines – seemingly international phenomenon.²⁸⁵

Interestingly, in an interview with the literary editor of *The Guardian*, Claire Armitstead, the latter was asked to give a personal statement regarding women's relative absence from the paper's review pages. To begin with, the editor seems to hold the general opinion that women's continued immersion in silence is overall due to the fact that they simply do not write the kind of prestigious non-fiction that gets a lot of critical attention, such as, for instance, political and military [sic] memoirs and diaries.²⁸⁶ In addition (and with specific regard to fiction) Armitstead comments:

a whole population of very clever women...have been encouraged towards genre fiction such as chick lit or historical romance, because that's what sells. But in terms of book reviews, this sector isn't as

²⁸⁴ Mackenzie, 'Revisiting the Reviews', p. 9.

²⁸⁵ The article further outlines that: 'This situation is not unique to the UK. Laura Miller, co-founder of online culture magazine Salon.com, wrote last year: "Every few years, someone counts up the titles covered in *The New York Times Book Review* and the short fiction published in *The New Yorker*, as well as the bylines and literary works reviewed in such highbrow journals as *Harper's* and *The New York Review of Books*, and observes that the male names outnumber the female by about two to one.'" Id.

²⁸⁶ Id.

prestigious as the sort of genres men tend to dominate, such as crime and thrillers.²⁸⁷

These statements, then, are indeed quite fascinating in their revelation of the systematised (and gendered) genius logic at work. For Armitstead not only implicitly blames women for their absence from review pages, what they are ultimately being reproached for is their limited contribution to genres which appear to have achieved their high prestige *because* they are dominated by men ('this sector isn't as prestigious as the sort of genres men tend to dominate'). Instead, they are accused of writing for hierarchically inferior genres such as, precisely, chick lit and (historical) romance which have been shown to be given such a low literary status in part due to their very association with women. Notably, however – not unlike the case of Oliphant mentioned in the previous chapter – female authors are not explicitly blamed for their interest in femininity, but their supposedly monetary inclinations ('that's what sells').²⁸⁸

As this section has illustrated, the reception and perception of works by female authors seems to be remarkably affected by their definitional lack of adherence to the maleness of the genius protagonist and the moral of the genius tale. It often makes readers and gate-keepers either more critical of their literary contributions or more likely to receive them through what amounts to a virtual deletion of their importance, namely silence. Of course, it is crucial to bear in

²⁸⁷ Claire Armitstead, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁸⁸ What is interesting about the above interview is not only the fact that femininity is once more dismissed on the grounds of supposed monetary motivations (see also the cases of Esquivel and Allende) but that Armitstead is herself female. Although this is, of course, only a hypothetical analysis, one may nonetheless suspect that her own minority status as woman in a powerful position within the literary industry may contribute to her seemingly unconscious perpetuation of the genius myth's male oriented status quo.

mind, that – yet again – these occurrences may be regarded as symptoms of a larger circle of difficulties and discriminations discussed throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, all of these factors can be seen as both indicating and strengthening the gendering of the romantic ideology, manifesting the charter myth function of creating a ‘masculine circle’.²⁸⁹

4.5. Re-enforcing mythical bias

Now, even if this cycle of female discrimination has been illustrated as difficult to break, it nonetheless seems to also rely on occasional interventions which strike one as indirectly and perhaps subconsciously aimed at the myth’s re-enforcement. With regard to this, we may first of all consider a continuing tendency to publish attacks on female authors either individually or collectively, arguably calling upon the logic underlying the genius myth to rebuff the potential challenge to masculine privileges.

Such attacks have been observed to be remarkably numerous and take many different forms. In their most extreme cases, they turn out to be a direct, collective diminishing of female authors, actively banning them into the gender-specific mould of the ‘freak genius’. Although referring to female artists in general, the previously discussed *Daily Mail* article on women’s inherent inferiority may once more act as an example of this. Within the field of literature, one of the most (in)famous instances of such an occurrence can be found in the essay ‘Evaluations – Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room’

²⁸⁹ One may add that there are, of course, many ‘serious’ female writers who have been hailed and extremely well received by the contemporary literary system, especially within the English-speaking world. Among the many possible examples one could list previously mentioned authors such as Margaret Atwood or Toni Morrison, as well as younger writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith, Sarah Waters, among many, many more. However, as the representational statistics reveal, we have still not moved away from a situation where such eminent female writers present a celebrated minority.

by Norman Mailer, contained by his work *Advertisements for Myself*. As Mailer – although possibly in a provocative attempt to allude to the unspoken but powerfully sexist literary status quo – claims:

I have a terrible confession to make – I have nothing to say about any of the talented women who write today. Out of what is no doubt a fault in me, I do not seem able to read them. Indeed I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale. At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life, I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, maquette in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn...a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls.²⁹⁰

What we are encountering is an explicit affirmation of old mythical stereotypes about women writers, its argumentative power strengthened by the author's admission of his supposedly 'faulty' subjectivity ('no doubt a fault in me'), because it already foreshadows and somewhat deflects ensuing criticism. In effect, it seems that Mailer appeals – not unlike the *Daily Mail* article mentioned earlier on – to an underlying consensus about female writing arguably often buried beneath a layer of 'politically correct' declarations of equality, yet waiting to be addressed by serious writers ready to make such 'daring' and controversial 'confessions'.

²⁹⁰ Norman Mailer, 'Evaluations – Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room', quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 238.

In addition, the title of his work also goes a long way to potentially explain Mailer's underlying motivation for creating such a remarkably aggressive dismissal of female writers. One cannot help suspecting that strengthening the collectively inferior status of women writers becomes part of his project to heighten his own literary standing and to further 'advertise himself'.

A similar mechanism can also be found in numerous other 'attacks' against women writers, seemingly softer than the somewhat extreme example of Mailer, yet nonetheless re-creating the discriminative mythical set-up in its – to use the words of feminists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar – 'viscous circularity'.²⁹¹ The novelist Anthony Burgess, for instance, devalues the writings of one of the most canonical female writers by claiming that 'Jane Austen's novels fail because her writing lacks a male thrust',²⁹² whereas writer William Gass 'theorises' that 'Literary women lack that blood congested genital drive which energises great style.'²⁹³

However, attacks on female authors also take on subtler and, in some ways, more dangerous forms, because their gendering becomes more difficult to consciously detect. One of the most common instances of such subtle discriminative declarations may be found in numerous statements where great authors mentioned 'happen' to be male, whereas female writers are named as negative counter examples.

We have already encountered this tendency with reference to novelists such as Esquivel, Allende and Thanet. All three ultimately emerge as representatives of 'bad' writers who are 'cooking up bestsellers that bring in

²⁹¹ Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 13.

²⁹² Anthony Burgess, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁹³ *Id.*

excellent dividends'²⁹⁴ and are engaged in telling 'high-minded lies'.²⁹⁵ By contrast, all men in these previously quoted comments are referred to as laudable authors who do tell the truth and may be seen as the 'true masters' of their genre.

To name yet another example of this phenomenon, the previously mentioned critic Harold Bloom also states in his Paris Review interview, with regard to the hierarchical ordering of poetry against criticism:

The idea that poetry or, rather, verse writing, is to take priority over criticism is on the face of it absolute nonsense. That would be to say that the verse writer Felicia Hemans is a considerably larger figure than her contemporary William Hazlitt. Or that our era's Felicia Hemans, Sylvia Plath, is a considerably larger literary figure than, say, the late Wilson Knight. This is clearly not the case. Miss Plath is a bad verse writer.²⁹⁶

Again, all of Bloom's examples of mere 'verse writers' happen to be female, whereas all significant 'literary figures' are male.²⁹⁷ Now, given the fact that Harold Bloom is himself a critic, one cannot help feeling that his statement – once more – contains a defence of his own literary status. In effect, it may be tentatively interpreted as a battle against his being placed – arguably by remnants of the genius logic itself, which traditionally regards 'poetry' as the highest art form²⁹⁸ – beneath female creators such as the 'bad verse writer' Sylvia Plath.

²⁹⁴ See Chapter Two, Palaverish, 'Macondo y otros mitos'.

²⁹⁵ See Chapter Two, Gardner, *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol.2*, pp. 173-4.

²⁹⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, p. 334.

²⁹⁷ It is important to note at this point that not all of Bloom's dismissive comments are aimed at women writers. In the same interview, he also refers to Salman Rushdie as 'alas...not much of a writer.' (Ibid., p. 350). Nonetheless, the female authors criticised by far outnumber the male.

²⁹⁸ Kant, for example, emphasises in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*: 'Poetry (which owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least willing to be led by precepts or example) holds the first rank among all the arts.' Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, SS 53.

Both in his case and in Mailer's we thus also, arguably, see the previously discussed logic of the genius myth invoked to defend their own territory and push women out.

Finally, another crucial factor which tends to re-affirm and contribute to the lasting maintenance of the masculine status quo seems to be the fact (as has already begun to emerge) that the actual status of readers and gate-keepers becomes directly implicated in the judgements they make. As has been explained, the genius myth also contains a notion that true artistic value is evident only to a particularly discerning, elitist minority. Now – to a certain extent, especially within the world of serious literature – if readers and gatekeepers publicly stick to traditional evaluations of literature where, crudely put, a male writer or genre is regarded as by definition superior, this is also likely to reflect well on their own status, potentially lifting them to the level of the 'chosen' reader previously referred to as almost equivalent to the exclusivity to the genius itself. By the same token, however, voices defending such lowly genres as chick lit would risk (or at least fear the risk of) devaluing their own intellectual status, by speaking in accordance with the misguided (female) masses.

This, in turn, may be regarded as a battle of particular importance for the minority of female voices in top positions within the literary field. For as has been hinted, one may suspect that it is clearly often safer to defend their fragile positions of power through an adherence to the masculine status quo and by ideologically distancing themselves from a potential association with the anti-genius category of overt femininity. Ultimately – as will be subsequently discussed with reference to the phenomenon of over-identification – this may be

one of the reasons behind the fact that so many women (like Armitstead) seem to indirectly contribute to a continued prejudice against female writers.²⁹⁹ Both the channelling away and the bias against women writers therefore strike one as intricately interlinked – forming a circle of their own – in their constant perpetuation of the genius ideology.

4.6. Conclusion

During this chapter, we have looked at numerous outward effects of the genius myth on women writers. This has included analyses ranging from potential authors being channelled away from creation into traditional helpmate roles, to novelists and whole thematic areas and genres being received in silence because of their association with femininity. Furthermore, it has been illustrated how this prejudice appears to also be actively maintained through re-current explicit or implicit attacks on female writers, as well as through the implications of readers' and gatekeepers' own status in the judgments they make.

What has therefore arisen throughout this chapter is the complexity of the genius myth's outward operations against women writers, working – albeit always within a context of larger patriarchal structures which the myth itself

²⁹⁹ As another case in point, one may mention the noted frequency of female reviewers disparagingly commenting about feminist writers in magazines such as the *New York Times*. According to Sarah Seltzer in her article 'Hard Times' - 'The New York Times Book Review...has become the place where serious feminist books come to die — or more accurately, to be dismissed with the flick of a well-manicured postfeminist wrist.' (Sarah Seltzer, 'Hard Times' in *Bitchmedia*, consulted at <<http://bitchmagazine.org/article/hard-times>>, accessed April 2011.) To name just one concrete example of this, one may provide an excerpt from the former ballerina Toni Bentley's review of *Learning to Drive* by Katha Pollitt: 'Groaning and moaning from clever, sassy women has become a genre unto itself, the righteous revenge of the liberal, pre-, during- or postmenopausal woman (anyone missing?) in the post-chick-lit age (it is over, isn't it?). Perhaps this heralds the birth of fourth-wave feminism? (Or is it the fifth?) Or maybe it's not something political, but just plain old biblical revenge: God knows women have centuries of wrongs to catch up on. An enraged, educated woman (*Vagina dentata intellectualis*) with her arsenal of experience, observation, self-deprecation and indignation is a force to be reckoned with, a kind of intellectual Mike Tyson - though, apparently, she is still not as likely to be seduced into bed as the bombshell bimbo, one reason she's so irate.' Toni Bentley, 'Life, and My Evil Ex-Boyfriend', *The New York Times*, 23 September 2007.

inscribes – on countless levels to continue and enforce its narrative moral of female inferiority.

Having now come to the end of part one of the present discussion, it is time to move on to part two's detailed analysis of the way the genius myth also operates inwardly to constantly re-affirm its functions as a masculine circle.

PART TWO: A CIRCLE WITHIN

Chapter Five: Inward Effects of the Genius Myth

5.1. Introduction

During the previous part, we have looked at the basic mythical and gendered nature of the genius ideology and the way it outwardly perpetuates itself by helping to bias the reception of women writers. We have seen how a ‘mere’ idea comes to create part of the literary world’s reality, cyclically re-enforcing its narrative moral of male superiority. The two – lengthier – chapters of this second part aim to take us to the heart of this thesis, by showing how the masculine myth has often been internalised to produce a similar circle on a psychological level, affecting the self-perception of male and female authors and, in relation to this, guiding or hindering their artistic development.

Whereas the subsequent chapter will analyse this phenomenon with regard to each particular stage of creativity as presented during this thesis’ introduction, it is this chapter’s objective to outline its basic operations (including a detailed analysis of the reasons behind the importance of self-esteem for the creative process), as well as providing a detailed illustration of it in the form of three individual case studies. As such, it will be divided into the following sections. The first, ‘Forms of identification’ will discuss the underlying psychological mechanism whereby many authors align their sense of self with the mythical genius protagonist, thus opening themselves to the potentially beneficial as well as destructive operations of the ideology. As the title suggests, the subsequent Section 5.3., ‘A positive circle’, will then analyse how the particular endorsement of the myth presented as ‘positive identification’ can drive the creative process, especially through its co-operation with an extremely

enabling form of confidence. By the same token, Section 5.4., ‘A negative circle’, will illustrate how these potential benefits become essentially reversed if authors predominantly tend towards a relationship with the genius mythology discussed as ‘negative identification’. During Section 5.5., ‘The gendered aspect’, some crucial reasons why the positive functions of genius tend to be more readily available to men and its negative elements more likely to affect women will begin to emerge. Finally, Section 5.6., ‘The Interviews and case studies’, will discuss some general findings regarding these operations in the interviews conducted as well as three case studies of female writers at each stage of creative development. As implied, the latter have the core objective of portraying and investigating how the genius ideology acts out in their individual lives and careers.

It will become manifest that the myth of genius – in many ways paradoxically given the inherent untruth of many of its most basic assumptions³⁰⁰ – truly tends to continue its charter myth function from the inside by enhancing the creative process of men and complicating that of women. Once again – if on a different level – the romantic tale and its narrative moral will be shown to potentially operate as self-fulfilling prophecies, affecting psychological processes to yet again *create* the very phenomena it narratively encodes.

One may add that this must, naturally, not be interpreted to mean (indirectly clinging to the ideology itself) that the myth allows men to write intrinsically ‘better’ literature. Rather, the concept of genius often collaborates in their increased access to psychological aids which can be crucial for the very

³⁰⁰ And evidently only if one allows for numerous exceptions and complexities to this overall tendency, as shall be discussed.

creation and completion of works in the first place, as well as for their production in accordance with this thesis' working aesthetic of personal originality.

5.2. Forms of identification

It has been mentioned on several occasions, especially with regard to the neuromythologist John Teske, that one of the basic psychological mechanisms underlying the charter function of genius is its availability as a source of identification both of and for writers themselves.

Relying, therefore, on Teske's notion that 'myths, narratives, and stories engage human beings, produce their sense of identity and self-understanding, and shape their intellectual, emotional, and embodied lives'³⁰¹ and given the continuing cultural power of the genius myth as previously discussed, it seems that many authors indeed decide on their writing career³⁰² or build their sense of (professional) self in reference to the romantic ideology. They do so either by endorsing its mythical concept(s) or by strongly clinging, for their sense of identity, to a perceived or aspired likeness with the images of authors already 'canonised'.

This phenomenon of identification with an essentially fictional figure (and its 'physical manifestations') is to be understood as not entirely dissimilar from the processes that take place during the engagement with a fictional character itself.³⁰³ In fact, the choice of becoming an 'author' can be somewhat

³⁰¹ See previous quote Chapter Two, Teske, 'Neuromythology', p. 169.

³⁰² One may here also refer to the previously mentioned phenomenon outlined by Weisberg, that individuals with psychological difficulties may choose to become poets because of this profession's frequent association with mental instability. Arguably, this is precisely an instance of a perceived likeness with the mythical genius figure leading to a decision to pursue writing as a career.

³⁰³ As Watt states in his *The Rise of a Novel*: 'Man is a "role-taking animal"; he becomes a human being and develops his personality as the result of numerable outgoings of himself into the thoughts and feelings of others; and all literature obviously depends upon this human capacity for

fictional in its own right, based on an *idea* – often informed by the genius myth and not infrequently drawn from narratives themselves – of what this role and its adjunctive processes entail. One is here reminded of Ernest Becker’s famous observation in his work *Birth and Death of Meaning*, that ‘The world of human aspirations is largely fictitious, and if we don’t understand this we understand nothing about man’³⁰⁴ – a fact which strikes one as particularly pronounced among those drawn towards the genre of fiction, itself.

Without striving to be exhaustive nor pretending that the categories to be presented are fixed and unchangeable entities,³⁰⁵ this thesis chiefly relies on two dominant forms of empathic relationships with the genius myth, referred to, respectively, as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ identification. The former mainly describes (aspiring) authors’ adoption of the genius ideology to a significant (if limited) degree and their self-perception as essentially or potentially *like* the figure of the romantic hero. The latter is concerned with people who strongly rely on the myth for their understanding of creativity yet doubt or flatly discard the possibility of ever displaying or developing a remarkable likeness with this hero or some of his key features (such as innate talent) described.

Before turning to a closer outline of these two concepts and their respective effects on the creative process, however, it is important to make two more points. Firstly, there are – naturally – also other, related, relationships with the romantic ideology such as those to be discussed as ‘alien’ and ‘over’ identification. Secondly, one cannot emphasise enough that the present focus on

projection into other people and their situations.’ (Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 201) As will be explored, even the production of literature seems to partly rely on this very capacity.

³⁰⁴ Ernest Becker, *Birth and Death of Meaning - A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p.109.

³⁰⁵ One must never forget that individuals’ psychologically dominant myths and sources of identification may fluctuate over time and are unlikely to always manifest in such a clearly distinguishable manner.

authors' endorsement of the genius myth does not mean to imply that *all* writers in some ways revert to the romantic ideology for a construction of their (professional) identity. Creators may, of course, altogether dispense with mythical visions of themselves or their art, deploy their own myths or align themselves with other available mythical structures surrounding the ideas of creative productivity.

Indeed, one would have to be nearly blind to today's literary system with its ever-increasing market-ties (see the last chapter of this thesis) to ignore that there is, in fact, another quite common 'creation myth', adopted by many segments of the field including authors themselves, and concerned chiefly with writing's potentially vast market success. Even though it is not possible, given the specific focus of this thesis, to go into this notion in much detail, one may nevertheless pause for a few moments to outline this ideological counter-myth to the genius concept which might be called the 'Writer's Dream of Wealth'. Although not dissimilar from the genius tale in its narrative structure of describing an author's journey from tragedy to triumph,³⁰⁶ this more secular story can be viewed as one of 'rags-to-riches',³⁰⁷ where a writer achieves great wealth and fame mainly through hard work. It is embodied in stories such as that of J.K.

³⁰⁶ It has been hinted that the two oppositional myths – one 'spiritual' and the other based on market success – are, in fact, intrinsically, interconnected. As Bourdieu, for instance, states in his work *The Rules of Art*, with reference to the overall, cultural systems behind them: 'Even if they are totally opposed in their principles, the two modes of cultural production, "pure" art and "commercial" art, are linked by their very opposition' Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 166.

³⁰⁷ In his work *Reading by Numbers*, Worpole mentions with regard to this: 'The publishing industry has become one of the brightest jewels in the otherwise rather tarnished crown of entrepreneurial capitalism. It remains one of the few industries where fortunes can still be made overnight, and consequently the press and other media have become obsessed with rags-to-riches stories of unknown authors who have become millionaires in a very short space of time.' Ken Worpole, *Reading By Numbers – Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction* (London: Comedia in association with Boyers, 1984), p. 2.

Rowling who was transformed, through writing, from a financially struggling single mother into a billionaire.³⁰⁸

Still, despite the existence of such alternative possibilities, it is striking quite how prevalent some reliance on the genius myth continues to be among (aspiring) authors. This will arise not only from many examples of well-known writers and those interviewed specifically for this thesis, but may also be illustrated with reference to writers such as Stephen King. In fact, the latter shows how even those who may be expected to predominantly align themselves with a market-based myth of success can actually make heavy recourse to the genius ideology for a sense of identity and an understanding of their authorial role. As the bestselling novelist, for instance, explains in his *Paris Review* interview with regard to his problems accepting an editor's criticism: 'I think it's a writer thing, and it goes across the board – it never changes – but my first thought was, She can't tell me that. She doesn't know. She's not a writer. She doesn't understand my genius.'³⁰⁹

5.3. A positive circle

One of the basic premises of this chapter, then, is that a limited – positive – identification with the genius myth can be extremely beneficial for authors, whereas the psychological process described as negative identification can be

³⁰⁸ As is stated in an article on 'The World's Richest People': 'With a few flicks of his magic wand, Harry Potter has turned Rowling into a billionaire (we estimate she's worth \$1 billion). She's one of only five self-made female billionaires, and the first billion-dollar author.' Julie Watson and Thomas Kneller 'J.K. Rowling and The Billion-Dollar Empire', *Forbes Magazine*, 26 February 2004 [consulted at <http://www.forbes.com/2004/02/26/cx_jw_0226rowlingbill04.html> (accessed September 2010)].

³⁰⁹ 'King, Stephen: Interview' (2006), in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, p.482. One might argue that King is being ironic here. However, the fact that he explains this to have been his first thought rather points towards the depths of his genius adoption (which he may have subsequently distanced himself from).

seen as an often highly destructive occurrence, trapping an author in the myth's underlying, supposedly inescapable, determinism.

A damaging belief in genius?

When starting to analyse the psychological advantages of adopting a genius view, it is first of all interesting to note that an endorsement of the romantic ideology has by no means always been considered advantageous for creative writers. Quite to the contrary, the theorist on writing Eviatar Zerubavel advises in his book *The Clockwork Muse* that it is fundamental for authors to let go of all romantic ideas about the creative process which the notion of genius, of course, epitomises. As he states: 'Deromanticizing the writing process is...of utmost importance to any writer in the making.'³¹⁰

For Zerubavel, this admonition is principally related to beliefs of automatic creation and mysterious inspiration so central to the genius ideology. According to the theorist:

the common Romantic image of the bohemian writer who forgoes structure in order to accommodate essentially unscheduled outbursts of creative energy...is a rather dangerous myth, since it might lead you to willingly relinquish much of the control you can have over your writing by opting to rely on some mysterious and rather capricious 'muse'.³¹¹

One may note that there are aspects in this warning which deserve to be taken seriously and which point to one of the reasons why only a *limited*

³¹⁰ Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Clockwork Muse – A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations and Books* (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 4.

³¹¹ Id.

endorsement of the myth can be seen as beneficial. As will also arise in a latter discussion of a concept called ‘maladaptive grandeur’, there is a clear risk that authors take the genius myth or their identification with it too seriously, which may in fact result in several harmful effects on themselves or their work.³¹²

Quite apart from such a possibility of over-identification, however (and as thoroughly questionable as the hierarchical thought-system may be) to simply regard the genius myth as a liability to be cast off is to miss many of the functions for writers it has fulfilled, historically and to this day.³¹³

Limited identification and confidence

In order to understand these benefits, let us analyse in more detail the enhancing circle embarked upon by a positive identification. As has been hinted, the latter refers to authors believing themselves potentially *like* the mythical creator figure in some way. It is a form of personal alignment with genius ideas which can, for instance, be found in Nabokov’s famous statement ‘I think like a genius, I write

³¹²Incidentally, the phenomenon of ‘over-identification’ may also lead some authors to refuse treatment of their psychological problems, relying too heavily on the mythical belief in genius figures’ almost mandatory mental instability. In effect, as the psychoanalyst Susan Kolodny outlines in *The Captive Muse*, many writers ‘share the unfortunate but not rare belief that creativity and pathology are linked, and so fear that to “get better” will cost them their art’. This very resistance to treatment may then end up getting in the way of their creativity, for ‘psychopathology is more likely to get in the way of art than to be art’s prerequisite or source.’ Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p.102.

³¹³ Evidently, one here moves onto fairly complex ground. For it may be regarded as ideal for authors not to identify with a figure presenting an essentially wrong concept of the creative process but to be fully aware of the latter’s actual workings. While there is a crucial element of truth in this which becomes partly emphasised through the notion that only a *limited* and somewhat playful identification with the myth may actually be regarded as helpful, one must also note that it is the motivational potential of an artist’s adopted ‘working theory of creativity’ which is of particular importance. As shall become increasingly apparent, this has precisely been where historically and to this day, the genius myth has often been able to significantly push (as well as hinder) authors endorsing some of its basic, ideological premises, regardless and in some cases specifically *because* of its inherent untruth.

like a distinguished author and I speak like a child'³¹⁴ or Faulkner's declarations that 'An artist can be driven by demons' and that his 'only responsibility is to his art.'³¹⁵ In both cases (albeit once directly and once indirectly) we find authors publicising a vision of their work and role in typical genius terms. Alternatively, one may also name the example of a male, stage two interviewee (M.Z.) who, as shall be discussed, frequently alludes to 'this image of yourself as a great author at the back of your mind' without which – according to him – 'you are unlikely to write novels containing hundreds of pages.'³¹⁶

This is not to say that authors who will be discussed as 'positively identified' display a slavish endorsement of all elements of the romantic ideology, being thoroughly convinced by their own 'genius' or similarity to mythologised literary heroes such as Shakespeare, Balzac and the like. On the contrary, as implied, an empathy with the protagonist of the genius myth can only be deemed beneficial for the creative process if it is of a limited kind.

While this often takes the form of criticising some elements of the ideology at the same time as strongly relying on others, one may mention two more shapes such a measured empathy tends to take. Firstly, an alignment of one's identity with (the) genius figure(s) may occur as a kind of role-play, where, on the one hand, the self relies heavily on the ideology for a sense of identity while, on the other, being aware of the fictional nature of this enterprise. This might perhaps best be depicted through the example of Nobel Prize winning novelist Nadine Gordimer, who explains in her work *Writing and Being*: 'I ate and slept at home, but I had my essential being in books. Rilke...Chekhov and

³¹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, quoted in *Strong Opinions, The Robot Wisdom Page*, <<http://www.robotwisdom.com/jorn/nabokov.html>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed January 2011.

³¹⁵ See previous footnote Chapter 2, 'Faulkner: Interview', p. 37.

³¹⁶ Interview M.Z.

Dostoevsky...Proust...Yeats...These and other writers were my mentors, out of whom I tried to make an artificial construct of myself.³¹⁷ Apart from thus outlining how she created her very sense of self in direct relation to eminent 'genius' authors, the novelist also displays an acute awareness of the artificiality ('artificial construct of myself') inherent in this mythical form of identity.³¹⁸

Another manner in which such a distanced identification seems to be achieved is through the use of basic genius imagery not so much for a present as for an idealised future sense of self to be worked towards. This was, in effect, epitomised by the male stage two author M.Z. previously mentioned, who through the course of the interview reveals the 'great writer at the back of one's mind' to be a kind of future ideal of life fulfilment – a 'dignified old poet who looks back on many books.'³¹⁹ In many ways, then, one must regard the phenomenon of positive identification as containing both serious and somewhat playful elements. It relies on a kind of 'fictional truth' and hence possesses the limited authority of fictional characters who come fully alive in a process of empathy yet are, at the same time (at least partly) known to be inventions, unreal.

Now, it has been implied that one of the key ways in which a positive identification with the genius myth can benefit authors is through its tendency to strengthen a feature of paramount importance for the creative process, namely that of confidence. Exploring this crucial feature in somewhat more detail, one

³¹⁷ Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (London, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.122.

³¹⁸ Interestingly, Betsey Lerner in *The Forest for the Trees* also refers to this role-playing phenomenon in her description of how young aspiring authors frequently take on a genius persona (which then seems to become both more relativised and internalised in later years). As she explains: 'teenage writers generally begin to develop some sense of themselves as writers...College is the usual place where young writers experiment with writerly personas. I fondly recall the English Department's cast of characters: a handful of poseurs after the fashion of Kerouac and Cassady, one self-styled Gertrude Stein... a couple of macho-Hemingways, an effete Oscar Wilde, and of course the moody girl poets.' Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, pp. 40-1.

³¹⁹ Interview M.Z.

may observe that – similarly to writers’ alignment with the romantic ideology itself – this has also by no means always been regarded as a positive characteristic for writers to possess. On the one hand, it seems to be understood by some as implying an absence of necessary self-criticism and the at times more likeable quality of modesty.³²⁰ On the other, writers are, of course, notorious for their attacks of self-doubt which can initially be interpreted as a definitive sign of their typically low self-esteem.³²¹

In the face of these potential criticisms, it is important to establish that what may be regarded as highly beneficial is not so much a wild and ruthless form of ‘go-get-it’ confidence, as an *overall* reliance on one’s abilities which ultimately survives phases of doubt and instability. In some ways, one might perhaps more accurately describe it as a basic faith in oneself, a trust that one will eventually be capable of achieving one’s desired aims. Looked at in this manner, confidence does not preclude suffering from phases of self-doubt and the existence of even fierce forms of self-criticism. As George Kneller puts it in his work *The Art and Science of Creativity*:

³²⁰ This potentially negative view of self-confidence may be depicted with reference to the Booker-Prize winning novelist Anne Enright who comments in the article ‘Ten Rules for Writing Fiction’, a compilation of writers’ declarations on writing fairly recently published by *The Guardian*: ‘Only bad writers think that their work is really good.’ Enright, Anne, in ‘Ten Rules for Writing’, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2010 [consulted at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one>> (accessed July 2010)]. Or, as the male stage one author, R.S., replied when questioned as to the importance of self-confidence for his writing. ‘Self-confidence? I don’t even know what that is. Actually, I find confident people...fairly suspect. Being self-confident, for me, is almost equivalent to having bad breath.’ Interview R.S.

³²¹ Numerous writers on writing have noted the common experience of self-doubt during authors’ development of themselves and their work. In this manner, Betsy Lerner explains in *The Forest for the Trees* that ‘even the most celebrated writers are plagued by self-doubt and suffer enormous bouts of failure of confidence.’ (Lerner, *The Forest For the Trees - An Editor’s Advice to Writers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000) p.85). Similarly, Dorothea Brande highlights that ‘Every writer goes through this period of despair.’ Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, p.43.

The creative person has an inner confidence in the worth of his work...The creative person, too, is often his own sternest critic. Indeed, he must be if he is to revise his work effectively, since few people sympathize enough with his intentions to be able to offer good advice. When I say, therefore, that the creative person has an inner confidence, I mean that he has an ultimate faith, not necessarily in what he has done, but in what, given time and fortune, he can do.³²²

In this citation we find a lucid explanation of how self-confidence must not simply be seen as a blind and unfaltering conviction in one's personal greatness, but rather a deep seated belief in one's intrinsic value and potential which can accommodate self-criticism as well as phases of self-questionings.

Furthermore, our mentioning of Kneller already implies that several creativity scholars have actually begun to interpret this self-belief and its intersection with creativity in a very positive light. Two fairly recent theorists on the role of confidence (albeit in each case conceived of in a slightly different manner and given different names) can be regarded as particularly crucial for our present concern, especially with respect to an actual interconnection between self-esteem and different forms of genius identification. These theorists are the previously mentioned psychologist Albert Bandura and the psychoanalyst Peter Wolson, both of whom have – as said – presented extensive research on these phenomena in works such as, respectively, 'Self-Efficacy' and 'The Vital Role of Artistic Grandiosity in Artistic Creativity'. Even though, as said, differing considerably in their scientific orientation – the former presents a cognitively

³²² Kneller, *The Art and Science of Creativity*, p. 68. Again, note that the normative artist is referred to as 'he' (thus underlining his normative masculinity).

oriented psychological, the latter a psychodynamic approach – they both coincide in their main premise that a strong faith in oneself, even in some ways regardless of one's actual 'abilities', is of the utmost significance for a successful engagement with creativity.

Looking at their respective theories in somewhat more detail, Bandura addresses this matter through his concept of 'self-efficacy', a feature which – closely related to the notion of confidence – can be defined as 'people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance' which in turn 'exercise influence over events that affect their lives'³²³ on many different levels. Of particular importance to artists, one's self-image and personal estimation of one's potential and abilities are said to have a crucial bearing on 'goals people set for themselves; how much effort they expend; how long they persevere in the face of difficulties; and their resilience to failures.'³²⁴

In this manner, Bandura places considerable emphasis on the advantages to be derived from a highly positive self-perception or, in his terms, possession of high levels of self-efficacy:

A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain a strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their

³²³ Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy', p. 1.

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures and setbacks.³²⁵

For writers, this may ultimately mean that they approach their work in a motivated manner, becoming deeply involved in the process rather than inventing means of avoiding it. Also, they are more likely to remain dedicated throughout the often vast amount of time necessary for the production of a novel and, as we shall see in more detail, despite the almost inevitable set-backs the path of authorship usually involves.

Furthermore, Bandura describes how this sense of self-efficacy may either be acquired directly, through one's family, school environment and positive feedback experiences or, indirectly, through seeing others like oneself succeed. As he explains: 'one way of creating and strengthening self-beliefs of efficacy is through the vicarious experiences provided by social models. Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities required to succeed.'³²⁶

In short, Bandura's is a dynamic motivational theory concerned with the notion that our personal belief in our abilities – rather than the possession of some kind of 'innate' talent – have a considerable impact on our eventual failure or success. Strong faith is shown to frequently act as a self-fulfilling prophecy in its own right, eventually creating the very capacity that was at first perhaps somewhat 'mythically' assumed. In addition, it may be created both directly or indirectly, through a process of identification with others like oneself.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

³²⁶ Id.

Of course, one might be tempted to object that this theory provides a risky invitation for (aspiring) artists to over-estimate their own potential. However, quite contrary to the general assumption that being realistic about one's abilities is vital for one's self (and artistic) development, Bandura states that a certain exaggeration of one's perceived capacities may actually prove to be beneficial. As he comments:

When people err in their self-appraisal they tend to overestimate their capabilities. This is a benefit rather than a cognitive failing to be eradicated. If efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people can do routinely they would rarely fail but they would not set aspirations beyond their immediate reach nor mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances.³²⁷

Therefore, according to Bandura – and connected to the fact that ability is not a fixed element but one to be developed – even too positive an appraisal of oneself can act as a valuable means of mobilising energies to perform particularly challenging tasks.

As to Wolson's theory on artistic grandiosity – a term which may also be understood as highly similar to an artist's strongly developed sense of self-confidence – it clearly seems to converge with Bandura's core observations and arguments. In effect, as the title of his work already suggests, Wolson is also largely concerned with the way in which even an exaggerated (hence

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

‘grandiose’) view of the self can be very helpful for an engagement with creativity:

Adaptive grandiosity is manifested in the artist’s enormous belief in his own capacities and in his tremendous ability to persevere and master his medium. When this aspect of grandiosity is operating, whether consciously or unconsciously, he feels that nothing can stop him; no frustration can get in his way. And when this occurs, he can deny the hopelessness inherent in his artistic limitations and separation experiences in confronting the blank canvas and its equivalent.³²⁸

Here, although addressing the matter from a slightly different angle, Wolson clearly coincides with Bandura in the conclusion that positive self-beliefs can have highly beneficial effects on artists’ and their works’ development.³²⁹

Given this basic similarity, one nonetheless, at first, discovers a seeming difference in the two theorists’ approach to artists’ overestimation of themselves and their capacities. Bandura emphasises the benefits of too positive an estimation of one’s abilities. Wolson, on the other hand, insists that there exists a fine line between a beneficial self confidence and too glorious an appraisal of one’s self which he entitles (as briefly mentioned earlier on) ‘maladaptive grandeur’. As Wolson explains:

³²⁸Wolson, ‘The Vital Role’, p. 11.

³²⁹ One may here note that Wolson, too (even though he does deploy female examples to illustrate his theory) normatively refers to the artist as ‘he’, thus maintaining the masculinity of the category as outlined in the previous chapter.

adaptive grandiosity can easily become maladaptive, and result in omnipotence (e.g. magical control and fusion states) or paralyzing fear or depression. Under the sway of omnipotence, the artist becomes subjected to the delusion that creativity occurs through instant, magical will power and not through persistent effort, painstaking discriminations and complex technical skills.³³⁰

Looked at closely, however, the difference between Bandura's and Wolson's opinions on the matter of over-estimation is by no means as striking as it may, at first, appear. For whereas Bandura is concerned with a mere error in judgment of a person's capacities which have – indeed – been illustrated as far from presenting a fixed and easily measurable entity, Wolson's phenomenon of maladaptive grandeur involves a person's complete self-idealisation to the point of assigning themselves a god-like omnipotence.

Somewhat paradoxically, then, and remembering our previous definitions of confidence as a feature which also involves an ability to criticise oneself and may involve phases of self-doubt, this exaggerated form of self-belief does actually not so much strike one as a true manifestation of high self-esteem, but rather an extreme, defensive strategy against insecurity. In this manner, it may not so much be looked at as a form of confidence, but an indication of lacking self-belief and 'efficacy'. At the same time, it points precisely towards one of the core reasons why only a limited identification with the genius myth may be regarded as beneficial.

³³⁰ Wolson, 'The Vital Role', p. 3.

Despite these seeming divergences, both scholars may therefore be viewed as highly enlightening on the importance of confidence and self-belief as essential driving forces behind the creative process as a whole.

Genius, confidence and creativity

The question remains how the existence of such high levels of self-esteem can be correlated to the genius myth. It seems that either a direct or an indirect positive association with the ideology can be seen as a means of creating or strengthening an aspiring author's sense of self-confidence.

Firstly and with regard to Bandura, an overall or partial association of oneself with the mythical genius hero – who represents, at the theory's most sublime, no less than a go-between between the worldly sphere and the beyond – seems to call forth precisely the kind of heightened, and in some ways necessarily unrealistic, self-belief the theorist describes. After all, we have seen how self-efficacy often emerges in connection to others perceived as similar to oneself, in this case the mythical genius figure, either abstractly or in its 'embodied' manifestations.

In the same manner, when looked at closely, a positive identification with genius may come to look remarkably like the phenomenon of 'adaptive grandeur' Wolson theorises upon. As this more detailed definition of the term may help to illustrate:

What exactly is adaptive grandiosity? It is the artist's exhilarating conviction of his potential for greatness, the extremely high value he places on the uniqueness of his feelings, perceptions, sensations,

memories, thoughts and experiences, and on the importance of publicly exhibiting the content of his inner world through his creative medium. This type of grandiosity involves the artist's total confidence and powerful belief in his capacity to perform creative work. It includes his conviction that his work will be an extremely valuable contribution to humanity, deserving of public adulation and possible immortality for himself.³³¹

In this quote, we see artists' 'exhilarating' self-confidence expressed precisely in genius terms. It contains elements such as a belief in their 'greatness', the highly original value of their personal feelings and experiences, as well as their work's potential ability to benefit the whole of human kind, eventually rewarding them with a secular form of 'immortality'.

Even though numerous examples of this arising interconnection between the genius myth, a heightened sense of self-confidence and a facilitated writing process shall be provided in the next chapter, let us nevertheless present an illustrative instance of its operations. Here is a detailed account of an event that seems to have firmly established novelist Truman Capote's positive genius identification during his youth. As he narrates:

I guess I was around twelve, the principal at the school I was attending paid a call on my family, and told them that in his opinion, and in the opinion of the faculty, I was 'subnormal.'...in an effort to prove I wasn't subnormal, [my family] pronto packed me off to a psychiatric study clinic

³³¹ Ibid., p. 2.

at a university in the East where I had my IQ inspected. I enjoyed it thoroughly and – guess what? – came home a genius, so proclaimed by science. ...I was exceedingly pleased – went around staring at myself in mirrors and sucking in my cheeks and thinking over in my mind, my lad, you and Flaubert – or Maupassant or Mansfield or Proust or Chekhov or Wolfe, whoever was the idol of the moment. I began writing in fearful earnest – my mind zoomed all night every night, and I don't think I really slept for several years.³³²

Here, we clearly observe how Capote's official permission to identify himself with the mythical figure and its 'concrete' manifestation in writers such as Mansfield, Chekhov or Wolfe, enormously boosted his confidence and, in turn, led to his 'writing in fearful earnest', an evident precondition for his latter success. Evidently, we can also note a strong connection between an external endorsement of the ideology (he was declared a genius) and a resulting inner sense of confidence.

Before moving on, one may argue that a high level of self-confidence and perceived ability may be the very genius aspect a person predominantly identifies with. Consequently, confidence would have to be regarded as a precondition for a positive genius identification, rather than a feature emerging in relation to it. In effect, it has arisen within the context of interviews conducted that many authors experience some kind of – usually early – positive feedback which establishes their sense of artistic self-esteem. This, in turn, often leads them to perceive themselves as highly able in direct relation to the overall genius mythology (e.g.

³³²Truman Capote: Interview' (1957), in Editors of *The Paris Review* (eds.), *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 1*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), p. 22.

as potential geniuses, or in milder yet related forms, as innately ‘talented’ or ‘chosen’ to become writers).³³³ In these cases, one may actually more suitably regard the genius myth as ‘chartering’ a writer’s pre-existent confidence and leading to a cyclical phenomenon we are by now so familiar with, where the self-belief attaches itself to a fixed cultural form, thus becoming encoded, perpetuated and enhanced. As a matter of fact, the example of Capote might once again serve to illustrate this, given that it was an outward establishment of his ‘genius’ that led to his enhanced confidence and positive identification with the term.

Moreover, and remembering the previous allusion to the fact that positive experiences of one’s own ability are one way of creating a high levels of self-efficacy – one may add that persons who are identified and/or treated as a ‘potential genius’ or ‘talented’ creator by others may also have their self-esteem crucially re-enforced even without necessarily recurring to the genius mythology itself. As a brief example of this, one may refer to an interview with the novelist Mark McNay who, significantly, replied when asked when and how he started writing fiction:

When I started my BA in English Literature, I wrote a short story about this prostitute and her pimp, and their adventures getting some money and scoring some drugs. I let a friend of mine read it. She was a writer who

³³³ The previously mentioned male stage two author M.Z. interestingly described this process in the following manner: ‘One enjoys being able to express oneself, to develop and expand one’s thoughts. If one then receives positive feedback from a teacher or someone else, this motivates you: at the back of one’s mind, the “great writer” is born, and from now on you’ll see yourself in this way and you’ll try to write on and get better.’ Interview M.Z.

had published an anthology of stories at Pen & Inc Press. She told me I was talented and should write more. So I did.³³⁴

In this case, it was notably an outside person who positively identified McNay with the deterministic genius idea of talent. This seemed to have increased his confidence and helped to enable his writing career.

What we have thus begun to see in this section is not only the direct or indirect correlation between confidence, positive genius identification and a facilitation of the creative process, but also how this connection crucially occurs at an intersection between people's personal beliefs and those held by society at large.

5.4. A negative circle

Having outlined a relationship based on a perceived likeness with the mythical figure, the term 'negative identification' has, as implied, been given to a psychological process whereby an individual generally adopts a genius view of creativity yet feels unable/prohibited from partly relying on it for a personal sense of identity. In its most typical form (as implied) this involves an individual's conviction that geniuses and 'innate talent' exist and are crucial agents behind creation. At the same time, however, they doubt whether they can ever aspire to such lofty heights or detect such inborn ability inside of themselves.

Again, numerous instances for this particular form of identification shall be presented. For the moment, let us only briefly illustrate this notion through a

³³⁴ 'Mark McNay', *Creative Writing - Interviews*, University of East Anglia, Interview June 2007, <<http://www.uea.ac.uk/creativewriting/interviews/Mark+McNay>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed September 2010.

young, female stage two writer, C.S., whom we shall return to as one of the case studies towards the end of this chapter. Now, apart from demonstrating a strong belief in concepts such as genius and talent, it also becomes evident that she is very much plagued by questions such as: ‘Do I only imagine that I can write? Do I actually have any talent for it?’³³⁵ Later on, when asked to further define her conception of genius, she interestingly goes so far as to use herself as a definitional opposite: ‘A genius is someone who knows how to make full use of his opportunities...who gets right to the point (so I am a great example of an anti-genius).’³³⁶ Even though the latter remark is, of course, only made half-seriously, it nevertheless seems to sum up this interviewee’s immersion in the ideology accompanied by a profound fear that she cannot produce work in adherence with the myth’s sublime and deterministic propositions.

Now, in the same way that a positive endorsement with the genius mythology has been shown to facilitate an engagement with creativity especially through establishing a beneficial relationship with the fundamental feature of self-confidence, the reverse may be said to happen when an aspiring writer dominantly displays a negative identification with the romantic hero and/or system of beliefs.

To manifest this process, let us once again turn towards the theories of Bandura and Wolson. They also dwell on the way low levels of confidence – soon shown to be crucially connected to a belief in the genius myth yet lack of personal identification with the heroic artist figure – can come to pose numerous obstacles into an already difficult creative path.

³³⁵ Interview C.S.

³³⁶ Id.

In his work, then, Bandura explores how the reverse of a positive appraisal of one's self he calls 'low self-efficacy' may lead people to:

weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties.³³⁷

Comparably, Wolson states with reference to artists who lack the sense of adaptive grandeur he so positively correlates with functional creativity:

Without this ego-bolstering grandiosity to fuel and empower his creative process, the artist may become so anxious or depressed as to stop creating and or find himself clinging to something safe and known, instead of immersing himself in the ambiguous raw material of art.³³⁸

Therefore, in the same way both theorists attest to the vast importance of a positive self-image for a successful negotiation of numerous elements involved in creative production, they both also emphasise how significantly disabling a lack of confidence may be.

Yet how does this once again become connected to the genius ideology and, specifically, a negative form of genius identification? In many ways, one essentially faces a situation where the reverse of the above described phenomena

³³⁷ Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy', p. 1.

³³⁸ Wolson, 'The Vital Role', p. 2.

takes place. To begin with, people may lose confidence in their power or right to create because they do *not* conform to the overall image of genius. As Christine Battersby so poignantly declares regarding her own abandoned wishes of creative activity in *Gender and Genius*:

I couldn't be a Real Artist (I supposed), because the kind of authentic, self-centered and bohemian life that an Artist lived was not (remotely) like my own...without that kind of life and personality, I considered it impossible to be interesting enough to have a fully-developed self worth expressing.³³⁹

This quote clearly indicates how a failure to identify with the genius character and story line can lead to a strong decrease in self-efficacy ('considered it impossible') and a virtual disappearance of any sense of adaptive grandeur previously discussed. One may add that – as in the case of Capote (albeit here operating as a negative cycle) – there naturally again seems to be a strong link between an individual's inner lack of confidence and outward experiences of discouragement, often driven by society's endorsement of the genius view.

In addition – just as previously highlighted with regard to a positive circle of confidence and genius identification – the genius myth may also step in to 'charter' a person's pre-existent low levels of self-esteem, encoding and enhancing them by adding mythical proportions to a person's self-perceived lack of literary suitability and aptitude. This may be observed in a female stage two interviewee, E.B., who seems to make mythical sense of her insecurities by

³³⁹ Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 15.

explaining them as fears that she lacked the deterministic genius feature of talent. As she stated with reference to her serious problems revising and finishing work (to be analysed in more detail later on): ‘I think I lack confidence in my own ability rather than in the single piece of work per se...I suppose I worry that I am not good enough to be a “writer” and also that I can’t tell if I am improving. How can I judge “talent”?’³⁴⁰ Rationalising her insecurities in genius-terms, this interviewee appears to become fixed in a negative circle where a supposed lack of ability, as a harmful self-fulfilling prophecy, often ends up confirming itself through a resulting incapacity of reworking and finishing her projects.

Finally, an author’s low levels of self-confidence may also be the result not of a personal relationship with the genius myth, but of society’s endorsements, actions and judgments according to it. If we have looked at Bandura’s point regarding the frequently indirect acquisition of high levels of self-efficacy, he also stresses that the same holds true for the creation of self-doubts and a negative appraisal of one’s own capacities. As he elaborates:

By the same token, observing others fail despite high effort lowers observers’ judgments of their own efficacy and undermines their efforts. The impact of modeling on perceived self-efficacy is strongly influenced by perceived similarity to the models. The greater the assumed similarity the more persuasive are the models’ successes and failures.³⁴¹

Therefore, one need not even personally endorse the myth of genius in order to potentially have one’s inward levels of confidence affected by the outward

³⁴⁰ Interview E.B.

³⁴¹ Bandura, ‘Self-Efficacy’, p. 1.

practices it entails. It can be psychologically sufficient to be identified and treated by others as a 'non-genius' or see others, like oneself, become approached in this way. This is a matter which already strongly points us towards the gendered aspect of these different cycles described, which we shall presently turn towards.

5.5. The gendered aspect

After this basic outline of the genius myth potentially pushing both a positive and a negative circle of creative development, it is now time to highlight the bases for the claim that this tends to inwardly perpetuate its masculine charter myth function, by generally enhancing the literary productivity of men and hampering that of women. The latter is, quite naturally, connected to the fact that – given the profound gendering of the myth – men are more likely to enter a positive and women a negative form of identification. For, even though (as we shall see) gender is not the only factor determining the nature of identification with the genius myth, it will nonetheless emerge as one of utmost importance, pushing numerous women either indirectly or directly to a negative self-image and self-doubt.

A woman and no genius

It is an underlying implication of Battersby's previous quote that she 'couldn't be a Real Artist...because the kind of authentic, self-centered and bohemian life that an Artist lived was' an essentially masculine image. Therefore, it was 'not (remotely) like' the identity and life path options open to her as a woman. In effect, we need to here recall the full force of the myth's masculine coding –

anatomically, through socially sanctioned personality traits, its narrative moral and so on – to understand quite how many difficulties it can place in the way of many women potentially positively identifying with its motivating imagery. This may, for the moment, be illustrated through a female stage one author who replied, when asked directly whether it helped or hindered her to be a woman when it came to writing:

When it comes to seeing myself as talented or as some kind of genius...it hinders me...As you can see, I never mentioned a female genius. Also, I probably have a deep-seated contempt for women which becomes expressed through the fact that I look at them more critically and do not find their work as impressive as that of men. So, even if I know that I can do something as well as or better than a man, I would not have the feeling that it is as significant...This is a profound feeling that I cannot just rationalise away, even though I am aware of it.³⁴²

Thus, despite her attempts to ‘rationalise it away’, she seems to have very strongly internalised a sense of the overall inferiority of women as put forth by the moral of the genius charter myth, which not only makes her more critical of other women but, by an almost inescapable logic, also of herself.

If these elements intrinsic to the very basics of the genius myth’s charter function can thus be seen as discouraging women from a positive identification with the ideology, this possibility seems to become further minimised through all the outward forms of discriminations the myth symbolises and helps to engender.

³⁴² Interview C.V.

Hence – and as has already been implied – women may not only fail to positively empathise with the romantic hero due to a direct internalisation of its mythical mandates but by having their overall sense of self-efficacy undermined through several of its *outward* practices.

In effect – apart from the elements discussed in the previous chapter – it may be helpful to now point to some more external practices related to the genius myth which are likely to have a strong bearing on (aspiring) female authors' self-esteem. First of all, we may recall the fact that low self-efficacy may also become emphasised indirectly through 'observing others' – like oneself – 'fail'. This has a strong gendered significance, given the amount of women that, in connection to the outward function of the genius myth as discussed, have been received in a biased or aggressive manner, ignored, actively discouraged from writing, excluded from the canon and so on.

One problem that has been particularly highlighted by many women writers with regard to this is a resultant lack of positive female models to identify with. As the author Julia Alvarez describes in her introduction to *The Writer and her Work*, with evident reference to some of the mythical 'counter' roles for females previously discussed:

When I set out to be a writer, now over thirty years ago, there were only a few works by women writers in my literature courses that I could use as models. I was canon taught, so when I sat down to write I automatically pitched my voice to 'Turning and turning in/the widening gyre' ... But in addition to having no models for the writing, I had no models for the life. How did a woman become a writer? The options were impossibly dreary:

To become a woman writer, you had to be: (a) unstable and end up with your head in the oven like Sylvia Plath, (b) alone and lonely like Emily in Amherst, (c) 'lucky' like Mary Ann Evans, mentored by men and dressed in literary drag in the form of a male pen name and persona so that your work might be taken seriously.³⁴³

For Alvarez, her writing aspirations therefore had to clearly survive a difficult confrontation with a lack of female models available for a positive sense of self and concretisation of her own literary aspirations.

But there are numerous other practices informed or chartered by the gendered narrative moral of the genius myth which may affect women in their levels of confidence directly and irrespectively of their *personal* relationship to the genius mythology. As such, the creativity theorist Helson stresses that – arguably operating according to the patriarchal trust in male and distrust in female ability expressed by the mythology – many girls tend to be picked out as less special in their own home, hence often already having their confidence undermined from their own background of family relationships.³⁴⁴

Similarly, Spender has researched the commonness of a genius-like double standard operative at many schools. As she explains in *The Writing or the Sex*:

It borders on the astonishing, but it can be shown that in the study of English, for example, when girls and boys get the same mark, the teachers (and students) can invest it with systematically different

³⁴³ Julia Alvarez 'Preface', in Sternburg (ed), *The Writer on Her Work*, pp. xii-xiii.

³⁴⁴ 'Right from childhood, women are less likely to be picked up as special by their parents'. Helson, 'Creativity in Women', p. 48.

meanings. Girls can have their performance denigrated on the grounds that it was only conformity and conventional correctness which was responsible for their 'good' marks, while the boys – who have been given the same grade – are assumed to have attained their marks by virtue of their genuine intellectual ability.³⁴⁵

What appears to be at work, then, is precisely the mythical function of the romantic tale, falsifying reality or at least interpreting it in a manner which makes it coincide, yet again, with the overall logic of male supremacy and female inferiority the genius myth encodes. It stands to reason that being exposed to such practices, many girls become women severely impaired in their engagement with creativity through lowered levels of self-confidence.

Given all these elements, it is not surprising that several studies have indeed illustrated that – on the whole – women display notably lower levels of confidence than men, both with regard to their writing and life in general. This has, for instance, been analysed by the previously mentioned gender theorist Kimmel who observes, partly relying on Carol Gilligan's notion that girls start to lose their 'voices' during adolescence, that 'girls are more likely to undervalue

³⁴⁵ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 16. To further illustrate this phenomenon, she provides several teachers' comments about their respective evaluation of girls' and boys' work: 'But you can see with this one – it's not just untidiness as you call it. It's about his ability. His pen just doesn't keep up with what he wants to get out. Now compare it with this one (the girl). Yes, it's tidy, all very neat, but nothing else. It's got no depth to it. His is worth much more than hers, though you're right, it looks good.' Or: 'This is the one. Look at the effort he's made with these headings. You can see he's really tried. And he's got substance too. There's no doubt about it, when a boy decides to do it properly, he's streets ahead of the girl.' Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, both p. 15.

their abilities...boys, however...are likely to overvalue their abilities'³⁴⁶ – thus precisely displaying a gendered pattern of low vs. high levels of self-efficacy.

Within the specific context of writing, Linda Miller Cleary arrived at the following conclusion when studying matters of confidence and motivation from a gendered perspective in her work “‘I Think I Know What My Teachers Want Now’”: ‘For undoubtedly complex reasons, the young women in my study generally seemed to approach writing (and perhaps many other facets of their lives) with less confidence, with fewer feelings of autonomy and self-determination.’³⁴⁷ Of course, as Miller Cleary already points out, the reasons for this phenomenon are ‘undoubtedly complex’ and cannot, in their totality, be ascribed to the operations of the genius myth. However, given previous assertions of its pervasiveness and function both as an active force as well as one that symbolises patriarchal practices at large, it may nevertheless be regarded as playing a considerable part in the creation and perpetuation of such gendered differences of confidence levels observed.

Exceptions (confirming the rule)

Naturally, it would be wrong to presume that positive identification is a purely male and negative identification an exclusively female matter. For in effect, there are many noteworthy cases which do not conform to this overall rule. However, as shall now be observed, even these exceptions – rather than shaking the genius myth’s overall assumptions and narrative moral – often end up affirming the notion’s basic gendered premise in its own right.

³⁴⁶ Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, p. 170.

³⁴⁷ Linda Miller Cleary, “‘I Think I Know What My Teachers Want Now’ - Gender and Writing Motivation’, *The English Journal*, 85.1 (Jan., 1996), p. 53.

In order to illustrate this, one may start by looking at the crucial fact that many men, too, appear to be impeded by an essentially negative relationship with the genius myth.³⁴⁸ What is more – as mentioned in the introduction – this is to a certain extent inbuilt into the very logic of the genius myth itself which, albeit celebrating all men through its allegorical function, always positions itself as an exclusive category for ‘special’ men only.

Indeed, one may go as far as to say that the genius notion is always, in some ways, ambiguous in its workings for men, a fact which has, interestingly, already been recognised by Edward Young, such a significant voice for the foundation and codification of the myth itself. The latter clearly recognises the potentially intimidating effect the cult-like celebrations of individual authors might entail when he admonishes, in his ‘Conjectures on Original Composition’, that ‘Illustrious examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate’.³⁴⁹

At the same time, this in some ways necessary flaw in the mythology’s psychological ‘boosting’ mechanism does not deter Young from promoting its adoption as a means of initiating and potentially enhancing one’s creativity. This becomes perhaps most vividly expressed in this statement towards the end of his work:

Dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort of
thy mind; contract full intimacy with the Stranger within thee; excite, and

³⁴⁸ This arose very clearly through the interview process and was, in some way, an assumption built into the selection of interviewees in the first place, as three ‘blocked’ or beginning male writers were included among the subjects questioned. Whereas one of them, G.S. (as will be discussed), seemed to be impeded by the absence of a helpmate, two male stage one authors – L.M. and R.S. - emerged as troubled by a negative identification with the ideology. Interestingly, both seemed to take the genius myth’s logic of exclusion so seriously, they ended up shying away from the mere act of putting pen to paper for fear of producing more non-genius writing they did not value or down-right despise.

³⁴⁹ Young, ‘Conjectures on Original Composition’.

cherish every spark of Intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy Genius rise (if a Genius thou hast) as the sun from Chaos.³⁵⁰

The shadow of lofty precursors hanging over many male writers also becomes addressed in Harold Bloom's famous study *The Anxiety of Influence*. As the title suggests, this complex work discusses the unease created in many writers by the need to produce an original piece in the face of many pre-existent, eminent works.³⁵¹ While this problem – so evidently related to the genius myth's emphasis on innovation – is to be taken seriously, it would nevertheless be wrong to take it as a sign that the romantic myth potentially impedes men and women alike. For – as the previously mentioned feminists Gubar and Gilbert so poignantly observe with reference to Bloom's work in *The Madwoman in the Attic* – even though male authors might become involved in a patriarchal struggle with their 'anxiety of influence', the very gendering of the literary system exposes women to a far more undermining 'anxiety of authorship.'³⁵² In other words, whereas men might struggle with their fear of not being good enough authors, women are often plagued by an underlying doubt if they have any right to write at all. Also, as we shall see, the myth seems to offer its help to potentially overcome this 'male' problem and others far more readily than addressing the specific difficulties of many female writers.

³⁵⁰ Id.

³⁵¹ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence – A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³⁵² Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 48-9.

Now, after this brief exploration of ‘male exceptions’ which nevertheless do not overthrow the myth’s overall tendency to heighten the perception of male and lower that of female creators, it is time to turn to the existence of women who are – at least at a first glance – positively identified with the romantic ideology. As an example, one may remember the previous citation by Nadine Gordimer who so closely builds her sense of identity in relation to several existent ‘genius’ authors or refer to novelist and poet Sylvia Plath, who once famously wrote about herself: ‘I am a writer...I am a genius of a writer.’³⁵³

Also, a strong and at first seemingly unambiguous positive identification was observed in one of the female interviewees, a prolific stage three writer D.A.. Even though she did not actually declare herself a genius, like Plath, her positive endorsement of the ideology became particularly evident through a very firm sense of herself as a highly talented and ‘called’ individual. As such, she not only affirmed that she believed her writing path to be a form of spiritual calling,³⁵⁴ but also made statements such as the following: ‘I really believe we are all born with a specific talent. I was lucky to identify what I was good at when I was very young.’³⁵⁵ These examples therefore manifest that a positive identification with the genius mythology need not necessarily be limited to men.

However, even though this may turn out to be beneficial to the creative process of these individual women, it also seems to almost inevitably lead to a form of ‘alien identification’. In other words, on entering an essentially masculine territory, they often ultimately affirm themselves as ‘exceptionally

³⁵³ Plath, Sylvia, quoted in Suman Agarwal, *Sylvia Plath* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 2003), p. 51.

³⁵⁴ In her own words: ‘I don’t think religion is a vocation. Writing is.’ Interview D.A.

³⁵⁵ Id.

exceptional' women, thus either implicitly confirming the collective inferiority of women and/or paying a high price in their personal lives.³⁵⁶

To understand this, let us point towards the gendered ambiguity already inherent in the fact that Gordimer builds her 'artificial construct of herself' with reference to purely *male* authors (Rilke, Proust, Yeats etc.). What is more, she also explains how this process of a literary identity formation led her to empathise with the eponymous hero of Albert Camus' work *Le Premier Homme* (who also has to invent a sense of self beyond all roles available for him from his immediate environment): 'Let us not worry about the gender: I was come to the same necessity; to make myself, in the metaphor of the First Man.'³⁵⁷ Here, despite Gordimer's introduction to this declaration ('let us not worry about gender'), this may in fact be taken as a symbol of the very 'worry about gender' lying at the heart of this chapter and this thesis as a whole: Namely that to forge out her identity as a writer, Gordimer has to rely on an essentially masculine image, leading her to the paradoxical necessity where, as a woman, she ends up imaginatively creating herself as the 'first man.'³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ To further explore the mechanism behind this particular form of identification one may briefly refer to the previously mentioned work *Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal. Here, the theatre practitioner and theorist discusses an interesting narrative principle called 'osmosis' through which an audience, immersed in a process of identification, takes on the implicit values transported by a particular story and, in this case, myth. As an example of this, he names Hollywood Westerns watched by Mexicans. According to him, many of these films portray the latter as the 'gangsters' to be eliminated. Nonetheless, because of the way the Hollywood protagonists are presented, many Mexicans still tend to identify with the heroes rather than with the representatives of their own nationality, hence – in Boal's terms – empathising (against their own collective interest) with their actual oppressor (See Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 114). Now, although I do not now mean to present a simplified vision of men as the collective oppressors of women, what is nevertheless revealing about this notion is that a comparable process seems to take place when women do identify with the normatively male hero of the genius myth.

³⁵⁷ Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, p. 121.

³⁵⁸ There are countless possible examples for the paradoxical situation the masculine coding of the writing figure has put women in. The early novelist and playwright Aphra Behn, for instance, talks about 'my masculine part, the poet in me.' (Aphra Behn quoted in Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, p. 66). In a comparable manner, Anaïs Nin remarks in her diary: 'I was walking along Broadway thinking: in my books I can ordain, rule, walk, laugh, shout, accuse, act in any way I please. I am creator and king [sic].' Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin Volume II*, p. 27.

The way this may often end up working against women writers collectively (as well as individually) may be explored with reference to two separate yet intrinsically related phenomena. Firstly – and especially historically – female authors’ positive identification with the genius myth often seems to have gone hand in hand with an assumption of their position as ‘an exceptionally exceptional’ woman within an essentially male territory and a related tendency to actually diminish *other* women writers.³⁵⁹

One of the perhaps most famous examples for this is George Eliot’s ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’. In this 1856 article published in *The Westminster Review*, Eliot – although briefly granting that ‘a cluster of great names, both living and dead, rush to our memories in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest,’³⁶⁰ goes to great length to negatively categorise and dismiss the vast majority of novels written by women. In a manner strikingly similar if not as extreme as Norman Mailer’s collective ridicule of female authors mentioned in the previous chapter, she – for instance – states:

SILLY Novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them – the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic. But it is a mixture of all these – a composite order of feminine fatuity, that produces the largest

³⁵⁹ In fact, we have already begun to glimpse at a similar phenomenon with regard to some women in gate keeping positions, as discussed in Chapter Four.

³⁶⁰ Eliot, George, ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’, *The Westminster Review*, 66 (old series), 10 (new series) (October 1856), pp. 442-461 [consulted at <<http://webscript.princeton.edu/~mnoble/eliot-texts/eliot-sillynovels.html>> (accessed July 2010)].

class of such novels, which we shall distinguish as the mind-and-millinery species.³⁶¹

What is more, this exposition ultimately ends as a discouragement for many women to even attempt taking up the pen.

in novel-writing there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery. And so we have again and again the old story of La Fontaine's ass, who puts his nose to the flute, and, finding that he elicits some sound, exclaims, 'Moi, aussi, je joue de la flute;' – a fable which we commend, at parting, to the consideration of any feminine reader who is in danger of adding to the number of 'silly novels by lady novelists.'³⁶²

What we are here – arguably – facing is an instance of one of the few women allowed into the genius canon actively pushing the myth's narrative moral of overall female inferiority.³⁶³ Thus, she ends up promoting the gendered logic of the genius myth at the very moment of – as a literary woman in her own right – potentially breaking it. In addition (just as discussed with regard to male reactions to the rise of the novel in Chapter Three) we see how Eliot feels the need to create extra ideological barriers for a genre which is evidently too accessible (and hence too female) for her taste ('no barriers for incapacity to stumble against').

³⁶¹ Id.

³⁶² Id.

³⁶³ Indeed, one cannot help feeling that she thus theoretically paves the way for herself forming part of the 'cluster of great' women authors admitted by the masculine myth, raising herself above the classically anti-genius female masses.

The other, related, phenomenon which can be observed in some positively identified female writers is that their entrance into an essentially ‘alien’ category seems to make them adopt it more thoroughly than many men.³⁶⁴ In fact, several feminists have explored how the previously analysed idea of geniuses dedicating themselves entirely to their work has often been taken particularly seriously by female writers, leading them to sacrifices in their private lives which men are not forced to perform in a similarly rigid manner.³⁶⁵ This occurrence may, for instance, be illustrated with respect to D.A., the positively identified stage three writer mentioned earlier on. In fact, her previously quoted statement regarding her possession of talent continues in the following manner: ‘I was lucky to identify what I was good at when I was very young. In absolutely every other aspect of my life I’m a loser. I know I’m a good writer. But it’s just a compensation since I’m such a huge failure at everything else!’³⁶⁶ It is furthermore hinted that this ‘failure’ includes her ability to establish relationships,³⁶⁷ develop real-life skills³⁶⁸ and so on. Therefore, even though her positive genius identification seems to have a beneficial effect on her writing,³⁶⁹

³⁶⁴ This is, arguably, a common phenomenon among people wanting to belong to what is essentially a – metaphorically or literally - foreign territory for them. In order to fit in, they often adopt the manners and rules of this territory more thoroughly and explicitly than those native to it.

³⁶⁵ One may remember the example of Thomas Mann’s daughter who, as discussed in Chapter Three, was asked to ‘choose between your art and fulfillment as a woman, between music and family life’, a sacrifice never asked of her own father or numerous other male artists (see previous footnote, Chapter 3, Analyst of Thomas Mann’s daughter, quoted in Olson, *Silences*, p. 31). As Atwood puts it in her work *Negotiating with the Dead*: ‘A male artist could have marriage and children on the side, as long as he didn’t let them get in the way...but for women, such things were supposed to be the way.’ Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 84.

³⁶⁶ Interview D.A.

³⁶⁷ Or, in her own words: ‘Sometimes I just have to run back to my brain to modify everything I’m living into something more extraordinary, more interesting. That’s not really healthy regarding relationships.’ Id.

³⁶⁸ As she, for instance, comments: ‘I doubt I can drive a block... I doubt I can endure a conversation in a meeting with a bunch of businesses men.’ Id.

³⁶⁹ ‘Writing is so easy for me that I make up rules to make it difficult.’ Id.

it also strikes one as somewhat unnecessarily affecting her self-esteem and well-being in other important areas of life.

As another case in point, one may mention the writer Ingrid Bengis, who recounts a similar experience of taking the genius myth and its mandates too seriously for her own good:

It was the dread that made me isolate myself at my house in Maine for months at a time, convinced that any contact or conversation would dilute the force of my writing; the dread that made me alternatively determined to share my life fully with someone I loved, and terrified that if I did so, happiness might prevent me from creating. It was the dread that made me decide that I could not have children (although I desperately wanted a child), made me shun intellectuals for fear that too much cerebral conversation would dull the force of my instinct, and drove me into acute and often painful solitude.³⁷⁰

Hence, even though positive identification is a possibility among women writers and can actually have a positive effect on their individual writing process, it may end up imposing unnecessary sacrifices in their personal lives as well as an ultimate affirmation of the genius myth's overall, gendered status quo.

So far, we have thus looked at the manner in which the myth of genius in effect seems to perpetuate its masculine circle on an inward level, by generally assisting the creative process of many men and hindering that of many women.

³⁷⁰ Ingrid Bengis, 'The Middle Period', in Sternburg (ed), *The Writer on Her Work*, p. 143.

This has been shown to take place through the direct or indirect internalisation of its masculine logic and narrative moral which – apart from other factors to be discussed – seem to have a particularly strong impact on confidence manifested as such a vital element for successful creative development. Let us now move on to see how these processes operate directly in different authors' lives.

5.6. The interviews and case studies

After this analysis of the way the myth of genius works on an inward level to perpetuate its charter myth function, it is indeed time to look at the manner in which this acts out in individual situations. As outlined, this will be approached through the examination of three case studies of female writers, each representing a different stage of artistic development.

However, before focusing on these matters, let us briefly complete the picture by pointing to some relevant findings of the interview process as a whole. Throughout this section, writers will be referred to as 'stage one' (i.e. blocked or beginning), 'stage two' (productive but unpublished) and 'stage three' (published) authors.

When glancing, firstly, at the particular role the romantic myth played for the twenty-one (aspiring) authors interviewed³⁷¹, the following observations emerged. To begin with, whereas two writers (although partly endorsing the romantic ideology in its own right) were predominantly interested in different degrees of financial success and the 'Writer's Dream of Wealth', the vast majority of authors interviewed showed either a fairly complete or a contradictory/partial adoption of the romantic ideology. With respect to patterns

³⁷¹ As briefly indicated in the initial chapter, a total of nine men and twelve women were questioned.

of identification, it has already been hinted that men and women positively and negatively identified with the genius mythology. On the whole, however, positive adoption was notably more common among men.

Furthermore of interest with regard to the male writers questioned is the fact that two stage two authors (A.R. and M.Z.) displayed a particularly typical reliance on a positive genius identification, whereas all male stage three authors showed a relationship with the myth that was both more critical and internalised.³⁷² This may be interpreted as a sign that, by this stage, they have become more confident about their creative abilities (and thus no longer as desirous to verbally emphasise them) as well as more conscious of the complexities involved in the process of creation.

What was remarkable among the women writers interviewed is that – apart from their strong tendency towards negative identification previously alluded to³⁷³ – they generally appeared even more concerned with the genius ideology than the men. As such, whereas all established male writers also showed an evident preoccupation with aspects which in some ways go beyond the romantic ideology (such as the literary market³⁷⁴), the correspondent female authors were far more interested in distinctly romantic notions of self-expression, inspiration and so on. In addition, they displayed a less pronounced tendency to

³⁷² That is to say that, on the one hand, they were quite ready to vocally question some of its basic assumptions and, on the other, seemed to rely on it so completely for a sense of self that the ideology – although remaining highly functional – had become nearly invisible. We will allude to this phenomenon with regard to the male stage three writer, S.S., who had so profoundly internalised his sense of permission that he could no longer conceive of a possible ‘problem’ with this stage. In a similar manner, this writer also stated when questioned whether he had any qualms about releasing his work: ‘Of course not. Who has this kind of fears should look for a different profession.’ Interview S.S.

³⁷³ As such, all female stage one writers, three stage two and even two of the female stage three writers displayed problems related to a form of negative identification which they – much in harmony with the specific stages they belonged to – tackled with different degrees of success.

³⁷⁴ See, for instance, the stage three writer M.M., who spoke in some detail about his ‘sense of mistrust toward the “industry”, which hasn’t disappeared yet...For me the problem is not to write but to find someone you can trust in the industry.’ Interview M.M.

question the existence of some genius elements than among their male (especially stage three) counterparts.

Now, one may highlight two possible explanations for this. Although great care has been taken to present interview questions in as open a manner as possible, the female interviewees (perhaps due to a common socialisation of women, in tune with their gender-specific mythical roles, towards maintaining social harmony etc.) might have subconsciously felt an urge to present a particularly strong concern with the ideas directly or indirectly put up for discussion during the interviews. Another, and yet more likely interpretation, however, may be found in a phenomenon observed by the previously mentioned gender theorist Kimmel: Namely that privilege tends to be invisible to the group in possession of it, whereas human beings are usually acutely aware of experiences and categories in some ways foreign to them.³⁷⁵ Also, and this has briefly been discussed with regard to the matter of alien identification, there seems to exist a basic psychological principle whereby only individuals who can take their access to certain privileges for granted are often, paradoxically, in a position to dare to question their importance. In this sense then, one may argue that the men interviewed were less anxiously concerned with the notion of genius precisely because it forms part of their masculine cultural heritage, whereas the women questioned felt a stronger urge to explicitly position themselves in relation to this in some manner both culturally dominant and alien cognitive category.

³⁷⁵ As Kimmel outlines with respect to both gender and race: 'when we study men, we study them as political leaders, military heroes, scientists, writers, artists. Men, themselves, are invisible as men...Invisibility is a privilege in another sense – a luxury. Only white people in our society have the luxury not to think about race every minute of their lives. And only men have the luxury to pretend that gender does not matter.' Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, pp. 6-7.

Turning at last to the matter of gendering, it is important to note that the occurrences of positive and negative identification did not always directly correlate with an explicit gendering of the genius figure. Especially one female stage one (S.F.) and one female stage two writer (E.M.) did, for instance, also rely on some female authors as key examples for their beliefs in ‘talent’ and ‘genius’, incidentally both showing a particular interest in novelist Margaret Atwood. However, apart from the fact that this does – unfortunately – not mean that they have also remained free from other, indirect forms of ‘gendered genius indoctrination’, this still seems to conform to the overall paradigm of Atwood functioning as an ‘exceptionally exceptional female’, whose creative heights are perceived as extremely difficult, if not deterministically impossible, to reach.³⁷⁶

The vast majority of writers interviewed, however, tended towards a strongly gendered vision of the romantic hero. When asked to provide examples of genius authors or writers they admired, for example, almost all of the names mentioned were male, as were the geniuses produced by those interviewees asked to draw.³⁷⁷ Interestingly, interviewees were also sometimes surprised to discover their ‘unconscious’ gendering of the romantic ideology. In this manner, the male stage one writer L.M. claimed when questioned whether the genius he drew was a man or a woman:

³⁷⁶ ‘I do think that this special view of the world [her definition of ‘genius’]...has something primeval, innate...On the other hand, and sticking to literature, I do think that one can even become a good writer without talent, through hard work, discipline, technique etc.. It’s just that you won’t become an Atwood.’ Interview S.F.

³⁷⁷ If examples of such gendered genius lists will be provided, let us look at a typical response to a woman’s drawing of a genius. When the female stage one writer C.V. was, for instance, asked to describe her own illustration of the term as to a blind person, she commented: ‘Well, [it’s] a man in his 30ies, short hair, shirt and tie, round glasses, serious, is sitting at his desk writing or reading something.’ Interview C.V.

It's a hermaphrodite. That is...OK, he has a bit of a beard. It's actually a man, I think...But that was unconscious...But maybe it's my opinion, I also named only men [when asked who deserved the genius accolade, in his perception]. Yes, but then, I am clearly prejudiced.³⁷⁸

Or, as the female stage two writer T.B. states, after being asked to list some concrete examples of 'geniuses' (a concept she previously claimed to endorse):

Mozart, Beethoven, Van Gogh, for instance. And, as to women, well, I don't know. For instance...well, there really are very talented women writers who I think are excellent, like this woman Marguerite Yourcenar, for example. But I don't know if she is a genius.³⁷⁹

On the one hand, these findings may indicate a certain caution that the genius myth's underlying gendering might not *always* form the explicitly discernible basis for problems of confidence and negative identification. At the same time, however, they *do* point to the vastness of its specifically gendered endorsement which, as we shall now see, does develop quite striking effects in individual – writing – lives.

After this discussion of some general observations, let us thus move on to our three case studies of female authors at different stages of development. Particular attention will be paid to the complexities of varied forms of identification with the romantic ideology, and their effects on individual lives,

³⁷⁸ Interview L.M.

³⁷⁹ Interview T.B.

including arising problems and potential solutions sought in connection to the myth's (gendered) operations.

Stage one: aspiring writer A.B.

This interviewee is a woman in her late twenties, mother of one toddler and – at the time of interview – pregnant with her second child. She has a BA in literature and was already on maternity leave. Although A.B. has a very strong desire to write and claimed that writing and literature are of the utmost importance to her, she stated that she has been suffering from a ‘ten year – only rarely interrupted – writer’s block’.³⁸⁰ This becomes manifested in the manner she, for instance, spends a lot of time thinking about writing, planning stories and relying heavily on her novelistic writing desires for a sense of identity, while at the same time producing only occasional unfinished pieces in sudden bouts of time and ‘inspiration’. What will be of particular interest to the discussion of her case is the slightly atypical nature of her genius identification as well as the way her writing problems become strongly correlated to an internalised gendering of the category.

Starting with the former, it is remarkable to observe how, rather than displaying a ‘classical’ negative identification with the genius ideology, this would-be author is affected by what strikes one as a complex case of over-identification. As such, she not only endorses the genius ideology in its virtual entirety (e.g. defining it in its traditionally deterministic manner as ‘something you cannot learn, that is simply a given’³⁸¹) but also comments when asked directly whether she in any way identifies with this romantic ideal: ‘To be

³⁸⁰ Interview A.B.

³⁸¹ Id.

honest, I do actually think that I am a writing genius (laughs)...Well, to be honest, I am quite convinced by my overall talent.’³⁸²

At a first glance, this might appear like a form of positive identification even more pronounced than that discussed in relation to other, more active writers. Digging a little deeper, however, one notices that (just as highlighted during our theoretical discussion of over-identification) the interviewee actually displays a great, underlying insecurity which, in turn, seems to be intimately connected to her writer’s block. As becomes evident, for example, through the following declaration of self-doubt: ‘When you want to sit down and write, you’re always plagued by self-doubt...and think, well, that’s of no interest to anyone, anyway...you start feeling intimidated...you tell yourself, I am not...Simone de Beauvoir.’³⁸³ Arguably then, this observation already reveals her supposed self-belief as a way of concealing insecurity rather than expressing confidence, or – more accurately – as a kind of ‘fantasy’ so fragile (see previous analyses of ‘maladaptive grandeur’) it seems unable to bear more than the most temporary confrontations with reality.

Moving onto the second point of interest, it furthermore begins to emerge that A.B., almost guiltily, conceives of this insecurity – and her writing problems in general – in terms of some of the basic gendered genius functions as previously examined. She, for instance, clearly resents how her role as a procreator and helpmate significantly cuts down on the time and ‘motive energy’ available for writing. As she states in a general comment about relationships which seems to have strong resemblances to her personal life:

³⁸² Id.

³⁸³ Id.

you need a ridiculous amount of persistence and a ridiculous amount of ambition and I don't want to claim that women are less ambitious...but women have many, many other tasks and...when they happen to be in a relationship or have a family, then it is the woman who keeps the whole thing alive, the housework and what not and then you simply don't have so much time. A man can say, OK, I am going to work, but when he comes home and has a wife who does all the housework anyway, then he really has free time and can, for instance, sit down and write.³⁸⁴

This quote – an explicit example of how even in the twenty first century and within the Western world there are (many) women strongly tied up in their traditional mythical roles – thus shows how the latter keep complicating A.B.'s writing desires, making her lack the time and energy which would (in her own perception) allow her to plausibly mobilise the 'ridiculous amount of persistence' needed for the writing of a novel.

Remarkably, the following comment both sums up this notion, while at the same time permitting a glimpse at the fundamental complexity of the problem: 'There are a few things, a few ideas of projects which I would like to do, but at the moment I am chiefly a mother and that does not really leave much time for it [writing]. I mean, that is my excuse now, before it was something else.'³⁸⁵ With striking self-awareness, the interviewee therefore admits that there seems to be an underlying issue at stake onto which her ready acceptance of the helpmate role and the difficulties involved actually seems to have become superimposed.

³⁸⁴ Id.

³⁸⁵ Id.

Yet how might one define this problem? In many ways, it emerges as this aspiring writer's subjacent struggles with the phase of permission to be explained in more detail later on, seemingly instilled into her by surrounding attitudes towards a writing career, especially if chosen by a woman:

A.B.: If as a woman you say I want to become a writer, then you will first of all be smiled at and then the question comes so what are you going to earn your living with? And as a man, OK, so maybe they smile at you a little as well, but he will be taken more seriously. I would say, OK, he is a writer, but SHE is a writer, oh, I see, that's her hobby...

Interviewer: And have you felt smiled at in that way?

A.B.: Oh, yes, absolutely. Yes.

Interviewer: By whom?

A.B.: Starting with my parents, I don't know, generally.³⁸⁶

Hence, it seems that an internalised double-standard regarding the validity of men's as opposed to women's desire to write,³⁸⁷ already pushed from within the girl's family, plays a key role in this young woman's failure to accept and act upon her creative aims.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Id.

³⁸⁷ Virginia Woolf already observes in *A Room of One's Own*: 'The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?' Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 68.

³⁸⁸ Although there are often outward obstacles too difficult to overcome, it is also important to bear in mind that there have been women writers with massive 'helpmate tasks' who nevertheless found ways to create, because they (often in correlation to higher levels of confidence) permitted themselves to do so. As Alice Walker, for instance, observes in her text '*One Child of One's Own*': 'It helped me tremendously that by the time R was born I had no doubts about being a writer (doubts about making a living by writing, always). Write I did, night and day, something,

Added to these prohibitions, this aspiring author soon also – in a sudden onset of shyness – confessed to being plagued by the sheer de-motivating improbability of becoming a (serious) woman writer, a conviction she has evidently gained with reference to the genius myth's most basic narrative moral:

Also with regard to my self-confidence: You think, OK, to become a writer, as a woman, can only be achieved by such few and – I am sorry, can you delete that?...

Well, for me it's like this: If you simply look at it, then there are really few serious, serious female writers. There are really more men writing serious literature, this kind of intellectual writing. If we are talking about low-brow literature, then there are quite a lot of women. But this serious writing is mainly a male domain...yes, and I think my inferiority complex somehow originates from this, because I simply think, I don't know, as a woman...it's difficult.³⁸⁹

These statements may be regarded as significant in many ways. Firstly, we see a clear endorsement of the genius division of male writing as 'serious' and female as dominantly 'low-brow'. This complicates the interviewee's writing wishes because – while she does not want to be associated with the latter herself (as she soon declares, she does not 'want to write any sort of rubbish') – she also, as we have seen, does not feel she can live up to the demands of becoming one of the 'exceptionally exceptional' women writers. In many ways, this gendered dilemma – the sheer implausibility of making it as a woman – appears to thus

and it was not even a choice, as having a baby was a choice, but a necessity.' Walker, *'One Child of One's Own'*, p. 127.

³⁸⁹Interview A.B.

significantly undermine both her confidence and her motivation, providing, as she herself recognises, the ground in which her ‘inferiority complex is rooted.’

Of course, one may be tempted to dismiss her discussion of specifically gendered writing problems as yet another ‘excuse’ for other underlying difficulties. However, this becomes a rather unlikely interpretation considering the fact that she seems to seriously struggle to reveal this particular issue of hers. Indeed, one must recall that she actually asked to delete her statement (although she then granted her permission to use this material), a fact which not only indicates an operative process of insecurity and self-censorship in its own right, but also implies that her comment presents the confession of a very private, potentially dangerous, thought.

With regard to this aspiring writer, then, we have arguably seen an illustration of the many negative effects of the gendered notion of genius on women writers, ranging from a lastingly firm anchoring in traditional helpmate and procreative roles, struggles with permission and a lack of confidence very strongly rooted in the gendered moral of the genius tale. Evidently, human beings have their own complex personalities and histories, wherefore this is not to imply that all the writing problems this particular woman faces have been caused solely by the myth of genius. Nonetheless, in her case, a connection between certain difficulties and the notion’s powerful gendering strikes one as very clear.

Stage two: unpublished writer C.S.

The second case now to be looked at in some detail is a student in her early twenties who came to my attention through being selected (on the basis of a promising submission for a creative writing competition) for an (Austrian) state

funded writing workshop. Still, as we shall see, this ‘success’ of having been chosen had little effect when it came to alleviating the interviewee’s at times almost paralysing struggles with a predominantly negative form of genius identification.

Let us start looking at this young author by briefly exploring her particular relationship to the genius myth. First of all, even though she did seem eager to produce her own interpretations of elements pertaining to the romantic ideology, this writer – as will soon be exemplified – also showed a strong concern with most traditional ‘genius’ elements such as their basic importance and existence, the notion of talent and so on.

Furthermore – albeit in somewhat different terms to the previously discussed would-be writer A.B. – she also displayed a strong, if indirect, gendering of the idea. One way this became visible was through the German speaker’s repeated usage of the word ‘writer’ in its masculine instead of feminine form even when applied to herself.³⁹⁰ But her endorsement of the myth in its underlying masculinity surfaced even more strongly when she began to outline her specific views regarding the concepts of genius and talent. With respect to the latter, she, for instance, affirmed:

talent is not necessarily the same as intelligence. For instance, Jelinek’s novel ‘Lust’: one notices that the woman is incredibly intelligent, but does she have a talent for writing? Or isn’t her knowledge – which she

³⁹⁰ In effect, she replied when explicitly asked whether she would call herself a writer (using the feminine form *Schriftstellerin*): ‘Well, I don’t see myself as a writer (male form, *Schriftsteller*) yet, because I have produced far too little.’ (Interview C.S.) This arguably not only displays an underlying cognitive gendering of the concept but also the manner in which thinking of herself as a potential writer signifies the paradoxical attempt to measure herself as a woman (not unlike, for instance, Gordimer) with an essentially masculine category.

shows off in almost every sentence of this book through hidden quotes, allusions to other texts... – a way of hiding her lack of writing talent?³⁹¹

Soon after making this statement – which may be interpreted as an act of explicitly diminishing one of the presently most eminent female writers in German – the same interviewee interestingly replied when asked who represented a genius, in her eyes: ‘Goethe. Simply as an example of the fact that there are people who have such an immense scope of knowledge...which they can transmit so amazingly’.³⁹²

What strikes one as noteworthy about these quotes, then, is how this aspiring writer seems to essentially highlight the *same* feature (a vast knowledge displayed in writing) in two radically different ways, once – in a woman – as a sign of lacking talent and – in a man – as a direct proof of genius. Although one must naturally be careful not to jump to conclusions from only two examples provided, this may be cautiously taken to indicate that the interviewee has actually internalised the kind of gendered double standards earlier discussed with reference to schools, where a comparable achievement becomes interpreted as a sign of ability for men and a mere indication of ‘effort’ in women.³⁹³

Given her underlying gendering of the concept, it is not entirely surprising³⁹⁴ that this young author also exhibits notable signs of a negative form of identification. As has briefly been mentioned, she – for instance – not only

³⁹¹ Interview C.S.

³⁹² Id.

³⁹³ One is here further reminded of the gendered double standard of literary judgment, see the previous chapter’s discussion of the different reception of works centring on women as opposed to men ‘looking for love in New York’.

³⁹⁴ Notably, we may observe the massive implausibility of her personal talent calculations if even Nobel Prize winning Jelinek is regarded as her core example of a writer trying to hide the absence of an innate gift.

admits to frequently worrying about whether or not she possesses any innate ability ('Do I only imagine that I can write? Do I actually have any talent for it?'),³⁹⁵ but actually goes so far as to once, playfully, define herself as an 'anti-genius'.³⁹⁶

In harmony with several of the mechanisms above described, this negative identification does not seem to remain without consequences. As such, on being asked whether 'becoming a writer' presented a crucial objective for her (given the fact that she had expressed some hesitancy as to her right to call herself by that name),³⁹⁷ she answered:

Yes, it is, even though I am starting to see this as an unrealistic aim. I have this subjective feeling that every other person has the same aim and then, at some point, you start thinking: 'So many people are so much better than I, what am I actually trying to do?'...You see, in my case, there is the added problem that I have not actually had any really positive feedback regarding my texts, that is, I don't even know if they're worth anything. That's my own fault, you see, because I don't actually show them to anyone.³⁹⁸

This statement already reveals several difficulties with a successful negotiation of the creative process. We can observe a de-motivating understanding of her wish to become a writer as an increasingly 'implausible' aim. Also, there is an emergent fear of releasing her work, possibly related to the fact that she seems to

³⁹⁵ Interview C.S.

³⁹⁶ Id.

³⁹⁷ See previous footnote present chapter, Id.

³⁹⁸ Id.

place the power of judgment over her creations ('if they're worth anything') almost entirely into (fictional) recipients' hands.

What is more, C.S. also displayed particularly strong problems when it came to actually producing completed works:

C.S.: There is this sense of inspiration and I have this feeling that now I could write a whole book at once...then, at around page sixty, I always start getting unhappy with my work (even if I liked it before) and I start to restructure it...that inevitably leads to a catastrophe and I want nothing more to do with that text.

Interviewer: Do you have many texts 'until page sixty'?

C.S.: I have three and about twenty until page twenty/thirty, this page number is also a problem.³⁹⁹

Clearly – and possibly fuelled by her fear of exposure, as well as her problems with self-confidence – she seems to lack functional mechanisms for the middle stages of the creative process to be discussed (such as trying to push a primary process dependent 'inspiration' phase through until the end of a first draft and a sheer recognition of her subsequent power to alter her texts) that could see her through to a project's end.

After an analysis of these difficulties which may to a considerable part be correlated to her negative adoption of the genius myth, what is finally notable about C.S. is the fact that her form of identification (as has been observed with regard to all 'mythifications' of the self and/or others) also seems to involve a

³⁹⁹ Id.

considerable degree of fictionalisation. This becomes obvious when paying attention to the rationally incompatible facts that a) this writer was invited for a workshop because of her submission of a promising short story and b) she claims to be locked in a negative circle because she has not yet showed her work to anyone, or received any positive feedback. In effect, as emerged when asked about the competition directly, she actually quite proudly admitted that this was the first writing she had ever submitted (arguably quite a striking ‘success rate’ for a budding author). However, rather than using this achievement as a way of battling her insecurities, the author seems to all but cognitively cancel the implications of this experience.⁴⁰⁰ As we may see exemplified in this aspiring writer, this can lock negatively identified authors in a vicious cycle which is extremely difficult to break. For how, then, can they actually achieve a sign of their ‘talent’ they so very much crave to find?

With regard to this young stage two writer we have therefore explored the potential complexities of a negative identification with the – subliminally gendered – image of the genius hero and the various destructive effects that can result from it. Of course, this does not mean (involuntarily returning to a sense of determinism) that C.S., with her problems of revision and a mythical diminishing of her own achievements – is plagued by creative difficulties which she will not be able to eventually resolve. For, as we shall see with the writer to be discussed in the next section, it is always possible that, eventually, the specific issues will be addressed and workable solutions sought.

⁴⁰⁰ See also subsequent discussions on how even positive feedback often does not become interpreted as a sign of ability by women.

Stage three: established writer S.L.

Moving onto the established writer, S.L., this is a woman in her late forties who has published countless poems, articles and short stories and a critically very well received novel. At the time of interview, she was working on her second book.⁴⁰¹ She has a strong academic background in literature studies and one teenage daughter. What emerged with regard to this writer was first of all an – albeit somewhat ambiguous – lingering negative identification with the genius myth. This was then interestingly combined with a striking ability to confront and even overcome resultant difficulties through an implicit reliance on specifically feminine counter-images, and an acceptance of her insecurities as a point of departure for writing and as writing material in its own right.

Commencing once again with the particular form and quality of S.L.'s genius identification, it is initially important to point out that she did not endorse the ideology as readily or explicitly as the other two women discussed. When asked about her basic ideas regarding the romantic notion, she asserted: 'I don't like the word genius very much'. In a similar manner, she showed a certain mistrust towards the concept of 'talent', defining it (not unlike Weisberg in his *Creativity – Understanding Innovation in Problem Solving, Science, Invention and The Arts*⁴⁰²) as primarily a matter of interest and being drawn to a specific field, rather than displaying an innate ability for it.

However, despite this *rational* questioning of some key elements of the genius ideology, it soon became evident that she is nevertheless strongly – and at

⁴⁰¹ Successfully launched at the time of writing.

⁴⁰² Weisberg observes: 'We might speculate that talent is the responsiveness of a person to the domain itself, independent of any skills...Based on this reasoning, there might be no differences in ability between talented and nontalented individuals, just differences in the appeal of the domain. The differences in appeal might lead to differences in motivation to engage the domain, which might lead to differences in willingness to practice, which might lead to differences in accomplishment.' Weisberg, *Innovation*, p. 198.

points contradictorily – attached to some of the ideology’s main premises. This emerges, for instance, if we look at her declaration of dislike for the genius term in somewhat more detail:

I think there are people, and I think this is related to some form of holiness – actually, I don’t like the word genius very much... – but I do believe there are people who have a special perception of reality...And, of course, this is related to writing for me, and I feel that someone like Bach or Proust achieve this, well, this different perception of the world.⁴⁰³

Furthermore, as to the myth’s usual gendering, it is also of note that the writer seems to cling to a highly masculinised view of who is actually in possession of such a special perception of reality, eventually naming only men – Bach, Beethoven, Cervantes, Joyce, Proust – as possible examples. Hence, even though questioning the genius tale, the interviewee appeared to subliminally and powerfully rely on some of its basic and basically masculine imagery.

Given these factors, one is not surprised to discover that – being a woman herself – she declared to have been struggling for a long time with an essentially negative genius identification (applied deterministically against herself despite her rational reservation) and resultant writing insecurities. As she explained, in a classical statement of a mechanism to be discussed in the subsequent chapter, namely the discouraging effect of measuring perceived ability against a specific objective and judging them an implausible match: ‘[I had] such difficulty to say, well, I am a writer. Because, of course, my perception of writers is that they are

⁴⁰³ Interview S.L.

practically in communion with the gods and so my own inner voice would say: “Not quite there yet, are we?”⁴⁰⁴ Or, as she went on to explain, regarding her often debilitating writing fears and her explicit – and related – inability to positively apply the genius mythology to herself:

And so [you think] you’d better not even risk it, better not to risk it and become frustrated, because you are not going to be good enough. Or to risk it – and this is a big problem – and to be one more of the crowd... You see, my brother had this saying, which is really horrible, but anyway, P. says that if we had been geniuses, we would have shown it since we were very young, and we are not geniuses, we are normal people. So, well, how can I reach this idea from this position of normality?... So yes, this has been the main obstacle for me... Because it’s very, very clear for me that I am not this genius I have in mind.⁴⁰⁵

This is an interesting statement. Apart from displaying a somewhat destructive double standard by which she in effect now applies the deterministic bases of the genius ideology she earlier questioned *against* herself (‘if we had been geniuses’, ‘I am not this genius I have in mind’), it also illustrates quite how inhibitive for her writing this psychological obstacle turned out to be (‘this has been the main obstacle for me’).

Fascinatingly, however, what strikes one as having ultimately turned this woman into a ‘functioning’ author is the way she consciously and unconsciously

⁴⁰⁴ Id.

⁴⁰⁵ Id.

sought out ways to confront and counter-act these particular problems.⁴⁰⁶ On the one hand – and as briefly mentioned – she seems to have become enabled by starting to complement the daunting (masculine) imagery of the genius hero she fails to relate to with a specifically feminine ‘mythology’ of creation. As she commented on a drawing of what most helped her to write and overcome her difficulties:

So, well, what helped to me ‘get my writing out’ was the feeling that something inside of me could open up. That something inside of me could open and transform itself into literature. So this is something...which opens. I think it looks most like, well, what has to open when babies are born, it looks a lot like that, doesn’t it? But not in erotic terms, but on a very profound level.⁴⁰⁷

Here, a re-imagination of the creative process in more feminine terms, including an imagery of birth-giving and female genitalia (‘it looks like...what has to open up when babies are born’) seems to have stepped in as a very strong, metaphorical-mythical enabling mechanism.

In addition, S.L. observed that what eventually unblocked her writing process was – as previously hinted – the acceptance of her own insecurities and the decision to take them as an actual starting point for her literary creations. As she explained towards the very end of the interview:

⁴⁰⁶ E.g. She claims that it took her ten years of work on her ‘issues’ to give herself permission to start writing her first novel. Id.

⁴⁰⁷ Id.

You see, it's this insecurity which always kept me from writing which now makes me write. Because I have started to allow myself to get to know it through my writing. It's not that I am more confident now, but I have begun to realise that this lack of trust in myself – which at the same time isn't exactly a form of 'mistrust' – that this insecurity is also writing.⁴⁰⁸

Clearly, then, she managed to work through her problems by assuming her condition as a female writer and by directly confronting its literary and psychological implications.

With regard to S.L. we have thus been able to observe an established female writer's crucial battles with an essentially negative and interestingly ambiguous endorsement of the genius myth. What is more, we have witnessed her ability to eventually start resolving her difficulties by seeking out a female creative counter-imagery and determination to convert her creative insecurities into literature.

Having now come to the end of our three case studies presented, let us once again sum up the analysed women writers' different plights. First of all, we have seen how the aspiring writer, A.B., becomes largely disabled (despite her initial declaration that she is actually 'like' a genius) through a lack of self-confidence, her strong engagement with the helpmate role and an underlying problem with permission. With regard to the stage two writer, C.S., it has been shown how, again, low levels of self-esteem and fear of exposure seem to lock

⁴⁰⁸ Id.

her in a circle where she becomes virtually unable to finish a work and, what is perhaps even worse, take experiences which could actually improve and disprove her self-doubts seriously. Finally, our analysis of the established writer S.L. has not only, once again, demonstrated the potentially debilitating effects of a negative genius identification but also how these can be overcome by recurring to several, arguably, innovative ways of rethinking and re-approaching the creative process. Furthermore, albeit to varying extents, in all three cases a strong interconnection between the gendering of the genius myth on its manifold levels and their specific difficulties as outlined has been made clear.

5.7. Conclusion

If this final section has thus been concerned with the complex manner in which the idea of genius may affect individual female writers' lives, the chapter as a whole has analysed how the charter myth (providing a gendered image for authors' self-identification in turn closely related to the feature of confidence) seems to generally enhance the creative process of men and hinder that of women. This has been analysed especially with regard to two different kinds of empathic relationships frequently established with the romantic ideology, namely that of positive and negative identification. Whereas the former, as the name implies, is concerned with a beneficial circle where high levels of self-esteem as created or chartered by the genius myth lead to a more successful negotiation of the creative process, the latter tends to lock (aspiring) writers in a negative circle where destructive self-beliefs continually affirm themselves. It is in this manner, then, that the basic charter myth workings of genius to heighten the perceived

ability of male writers and lower that of women has been depicted to also operate, pervasively, from the inside.

In effect, if we remember the previous discussion of the genius myth arising in some ways as a means of pushing emergent women out of the field of writing, we may here observe how – most likely on a collective, subconscious level – the masculine need to (re-)establish a sense of confidence at a time when rationales behind art actually seemed to have undergone a kind of crisis,⁴⁰⁹ may have been another basic, psychological drive behind the genius myth's fermentation and popularisation. For, as Virginia Woolf so aptly states in *A Room of One's Own*:

Life for both sexes...is arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and strength. More than anything, perhaps creatures of illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in oneself. Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so valuable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority.⁴¹⁰

In other words, one cannot help wondering if the myth sprang up and has survived, so persistently in the face of its many contradictions and inconsistencies, also because of its potent power to fulfil an urgent need for

⁴⁰⁹ Apart from the increased presence of female writers as mentioned in the previous chapter, there is also a sense, as Björkegren describes in his *The Culture Business*, that art was forced to redefine its purpose during the Industrial Revolution and growing secularisation of society. See Björkegren, *The Culture Business*, p. 9.

⁴¹⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 45.

confidence, at least for those, invited by the exclusive category, to become positively identified with its glorious hero.

After this crucial outline, what remains to be analysed is the way in which this process may be regarded to affect each stage of the creative process, as well as a greater number of writers – and this is a matter we shall presently analyse.

Chapter Six: Genius through the Stages of Creativity

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we have – both in a theoretical analysis and with reference to three individual case studies – begun to look at the overall, inward dynamic of the genius myth, outlining how it actually manifests a tendency of heightening the creative efforts of men and complicating those of women. It is now this chapter's aim to enhance and complete this outline by discussing in more detail some of the numerous effects the myth has on the different stages of the artistic process – Stage One Volition/Permission, Stage Two Execution/Revision, Stage Three Release/Reception – both through its interplay with self-esteem and other important psychological elements. In order to illustrate the various phenomena investigated, I will – as said – draw both upon the interviews conducted and examples from other, usually well-known, novelists.

Before starting on this detailed overview, however, it is important to add some more important points about the ensuing discussion. First of all, it is crucial to bear in mind throughout that a) the list of effects to be presented is not to be regarded as exhaustive but dwelling instead on some of the factors deemed most significant for the present discussion of genius as a gendered charter myth and b) that none of the factors mentioned are likely to affect all writers and influence them in the same way. Rather, then, this chapter strives to provide a systematic approach to some of the key effects of the genius myth on the writing process and writers' development which (as we have already begun to see through the

case studies) then act out in individuals' lives and careers in different combinations and ways.

Also, and with more specific regard to the stages themselves, although they will be here explored as separate, all phases of creative development are of course importantly interrelated and do not necessarily occur, for individual writers, in a manner as clearly divided as subsequently outlined. Whereas volition will, for instance, be discussed as the first driving force behind creative endeavours, actually sparking off the chain of the subsequent steps, it naturally also has to be viewed as a significant impulse behind a successful conclusion of *all* stages. In a similar manner, it is also important to remember that the phases outlined may be conceived of as cyclical in their own right, with the process of reception (as will be manifested) essentially once again affecting the stage of volition.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that – for the sake of clarity – the previously mentioned differences between a direct or indirect influence of the genius myth on an author's level of self-esteem will here, on the whole, be unified into the terminology of positive vs. negative identification.

6.2. Stage One: Volition and Permission

This initial phase of creativity, then, is one primarily concerned with psychological dispositions towards creation, such an individual's wish to write and an internal sense of having the right to do so. If these internal elements have often been overlooked by genius-oriented accounts of the creative process, arguably because the romantic ideology tends to take both aspects for granted in individuals regarded as 'true artists', they should be deemed of the utmost

significance for any writing activity to take place. As Dorothea Brande indicates in her work *On Becoming a Writer*: ‘the difficulties of the average student or amateur writer begin long before he has come to the place where he can benefit by technical instruction in story writing.’⁴¹¹ What Brande is here referring to are – as John Gardner further points out in his introduction to her work – mainly psychological difficulties, the ‘root problems’ of writers often related to their ‘demon[s]...imprisoned by the various ghosts in the unconscious’.⁴¹² As will emerge, this first stage of creativity seems to be particularly prone to the effects of such ‘ghosts’, which a positive identification with the genius myth often helps to dispel and a negative one invites to multiply.

Volition: The desire and motivation to write.

At the very beginning of the creative process in general and that of novel writing in particular, there is thus usually a strong desire to write and/or to become a writer. Even though this may seem obvious enough, it is important to emphasise that some contemporary creativity researchers have in fact begun to regard the ‘mere’ wish to become engaged in artistic activities as the sine qua non of all eventual creative productivity. As Weisberg, for example, concludes in his work *Creativity – Understanding Innovation in Problem Solving, Science, Invention and The Arts* regarding the very core of artistic creation:

perhaps it is nothing more than that some people want very much to be creative, and they have acquired the means to do so. To many people, that may be a laughable oversimplification of the circumstances that result in

⁴¹¹ Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, p. 21.

⁴¹² John Gardner, ‘Introduction’, in *ibid.*, p. 12.

people's producing innovation. However...it may be the strongest and most reasonable possibility available to us at present.⁴¹³

In this way, what might predominantly distinguish accomplished artists from those who never produce anything creative – alongside the intervention of numerous potential problems and solutions we shall discuss in the following section – may be their sheer volition (and basic opportunity) to engage in creative activity, and not, as is so frequently supposed in harmony with the genius view, the existence of a superior 'talent' or divine calling. This may, in turn, be viewed as especially significant within the field of novel writing, which, given its previously discussed low educational and financial entrance barriers, depends especially on a person's individual initiative, theoretically allowing a lot of people to 'choose' themselves as potential future novelists.

Despite this seeming 'openness', however, the stage of volition must also be viewed as a highly vulnerable one, easily affected, for better or worse, by an author's environment and – here of particular significance – individual relationship with the genius myth. In fact, two matters we shall now turn to are the way the latter acts as a means of potentially strengthening or undermining this basic desire to write, as well as its effect on the 'quality' of motivation and – in harmony with the working aesthetic of personal originality – the work produced itself.

⁴¹³Weisberg, *Innovation*, p. 599.

Possibility and motivation

As has been emphasised on various occasions during this thesis, one of the basic paradoxes underlying the present research is that even though the genius view of creativity is essentially misleading, a limited adoption of it can nonetheless have a very positive effect on the creative process. This, then, may precisely be observed with regard to the romantic myth's interaction with the basic wish to write. In effect, people with a positive genius identification are likely to have their 'volition' notably strengthened, thus increasing the probability of this desire driving them through the stages of the creative process to follow. Persons chiefly identified with the myth in a negative manner, however, might have their aspirations weakened to the point of possibly even abandoning them.

In order to understand this process, one may first of all spell out a significant insight of motivational theory, namely that a wish tends to be strongly correlated to the basic possibility of succeeding in its realisation. As Abraham Maslow stresses in his classic *Motivation and Personality*, there is 'one important aspect of motivation that has been completely neglected by most psychologists, namely, possibility. On the whole we yearn consciously for that which might conceivably be actually attained.'⁴¹⁴

Now, bearing in mind the previously outlined basic principles of self-efficacy and adaptive grandeur, the potentially beneficial connection between a positive genius identification and a strengthened creative motivation becomes fairly self-evident. Indeed, if people (albeit falsely) conceive of themselves as innately talented or as potential geniuses, this self-appraisal can precisely make their literary desires seem achievable, therefore once again strengthening their

⁴¹⁴ Abraham H Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

motivation.⁴¹⁵ Evidently, one may add that this sense of possibility needs to also be combined with basic opportunity – a mixture of outward elements to favour the realisation of a person's literary aims.

To an extent, this general process has already been illustrated with reference to Capote, who – on being declared a genius – arguably begins to see his literary aspirations as feasible and therefore starts to write 'in fearful earnest.'⁴¹⁶ But one may also refer to the example of male stage two writer A.R., who replied, when asked directly whether he felt any affinity with some of the 'genius writers' ('Dante, Dostoevsky, Proust, Hemingway, Philip Roth') he mentioned:

Well, both Philip Roth and I are still alive! But jokes apart, I feel that I have ideas in common with some of them, and I also have a writing style similar to some of them, at least it seems to me that way...this motivates me because you notice these similarities afterwards (some may actually be demoralised by this, but those are the ones who forcefully want to write something entirely new and different) and so it becomes a psychological help: if I also manage to write in this manner, then I can't be so bad...it helps me understand my own limits and those of these writers.'⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁵ Even though here in relation to all career choices, Bandura illustrates the potentially strong connection between individuals' decisions to become artists and their possible actualisation of that aim: 'Career choice and development is but one example of the power of self-efficacy beliefs to affect the course of life paths through choice-related processes. The higher the level of people's perceived self-efficacy the wider the range of career options they seriously consider, the greater their interest in them, and the better they prepare themselves educationally for the occupational pursuits they choose and the greater is their success.' Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy', p.5.

⁴¹⁶ See previous footnote Chapter 5, 'Capote: Interview', p. 22.

⁴¹⁷ Interview A.R.

Here, we can detect the signs of a positive adoption of the romantic myth, evident from the perceived similarity between himself and other geniuses, as well as an awareness of his own and their ‘limits’, arguably preventing him from falling prey to over-identification. At the same time, we see how this drives him on, becoming an inward assistance (‘it becomes a psychological help’) for the negotiation of his writing development.

On the contrary, a negative identification with the ideology – which frequently manifests itself in people doubting whether they have any ‘talent’ to create – can have disastrous effects on creative motivation, potentially annihilating it through making it appear unattainable. This process can be illustrated through the case of a female stage one writer, S.F., who became so thoroughly convinced she lacked talent that she decided to give up writing altogether. To understand this case in its complexity, the interviewee in question is a young woman who not only attested to having had a strong desire to write, but also produced a considerably large (unfinished) draft of a novel which – albeit necessarily relying on my subjective judgment for this observation – showed an already strongly developed narrative ability. Nevertheless, when asked whether she was currently working on something, she calmly stated: ‘I am no longer writing now’.

Two interesting reasons emerged with regard to this. On the one hand – in what may be taken as sign of an over-identification with the genius view’s emphasis on necessary psychological suffering – she commented that this was because she was happier now and produced the draft of her novel in a time of

despair.⁴¹⁸ On the other, however, her decision to stop writing also becomes related to her conviction that she lacks innate talent. As she, for instance, emphasised: ‘I have often asked myself whether I have a talent for writing or not...now I am quite certain that I don’t.’⁴¹⁹ When being interrogated as to the relative importance of both aspects for her decision to give up writing – e.g. her absence of suffering and supposed lack of talent – she claimed each to have affected her ‘equally’.

Also telling on the destructive impact of her negative genius identification, especially with regard to her self-diagnosed lack of ability, was a playful probing into the effects of a potentially reversed situation. For, when asked what would happen if – in accordance with the half-mysticism underlying much of the genius view – she would receive a sudden sign, in a dream, that she was actually chosen to be a writer, she replied:

My god, a sign! I think I would try to write again. I would try to gather the necessary discipline, without letting myself get discouraged. To be honest, I am not sure if I could find the right subject matter, all by myself, but well, if there was a sign for my talent, I would try it again.⁴²⁰

As this further indicates, her supposed lack of ability thus clearly keeps her from embarking on a positive circle where even an overly optimistic estimation of her capacities would make her ‘try again’ and arguably develop the very skills of whose supposed absence she is convinced.

⁴¹⁸ ‘I am no longer writing now. This is also related to my life situation, I think. I have always written in moments of great despair, now I am OK.’ Interview S.F.

⁴¹⁹ Id.

⁴²⁰ Id.

Moving onto the gendered dimension of this particular enabling/disabling function of the romantic ideology, we have of course already briefly discussed how the genius figure's profoundly masculine coding might often, directly or indirectly, deflect a woman from a positive relationship with it.

Moreover, this very first step towards creation is arguably also one where a combination of outward obstacles (e.g. women's excessive involvement in their procreator or helpmate role) and the myth's overall narrative moral may be seen as posing a particular problem for aspiring woman writers. It seems to often extinguish their budding volition at its core by making such creative desires seem especially implausible for them. Let us briefly explore this matter in a general as well as detailed manner.

As to the former, Spender comments in her work *The Writing or the Sex*:

the belief that only men can reach the lofty heights as artists and writers...introduces an element of determinism and – for women – defeat and despair. They are deflected from their talking/writing before they begin. For if it is the case that no matter how hard they try they will never be great – never the masterful speakers or the fathers of the text – then the clear conclusion to draw is that they may as well...abandon their literary aspirations.⁴²¹

Here, Spender explicitly points to the fact that an abnegation of literary aspirations due to their perceived impossibility is a particularly pressing one for

⁴²¹ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 29.

many potential women writers. What is more, we once again see how the determinism of the genius view on creativity and the myth's essentialist vision of separate roles for men and women combine to re-enforce a sense of potentially fatalistic discouragement for women.

As to a more specific depiction of the form such a gendered undermining of the volition process may take, this may be – once again – illustrated with regard to the previously discussed writer S.F.. Indeed, when questioned what made her so sure she lacked talent she commented that this was 'Because I never have the feeling of losing myself when writing' and because she seriously struggled with 'Getting away from autobiography. This difficulty alone was enough for me to discard the possibility of my having any talent.'⁴²²

Two aspects are of particular importance with regard to this. Firstly, it is crucial to observe that instead of appraising her actual writing, this interviewee is clearly assessing her innate ability with reference to the outlines of the genius myth, seeking for manifestations of 'automatic creation' which have been shown to form such a central part of the ideology's narrative make-up. Secondly – and even more pertinently to our present concern – she also strikingly discards the 'possibility of talent' on the grounds of being almost exclusively drawn to autobiography. This is a strange comment considering how many established works of 'genius', such as those by Thomas Mann or James Joyce, tend to be quite intensively autobiographical in nature. But her self-judgment becomes less surprising when we acknowledge the existence of a gendered stigma against autobiography as a quintessentially female genre and often downgraded along the same lines as other typically feminine literary forms discussed in Chapter Four. It

⁴²² Interview S.F.

therefore seems that her negative identification has an indirectly yet powerfully gendered edge to it, arising in part from an automatic judgment of her own writing tendencies as being of an anti-genius, because implicitly feminine kind.⁴²³

Thus, given the profound and multilayered gendering of the genius mythology, this stage seems to often place a particularly large number of creative and motivational obstacles into aspiring women writers' paths. As Ruth Noble so succinctly expresses (implicitly pointing to the gendered aspect with her reference to 'stay home and cook dinner') in her text 'Womban': 'My society, the culture I have learned, tells that Art is something special, separate, something only the few can participate while the rest stand by and watch...So – why not stay home and cook dinner?'⁴²⁴

The Quality of motivation

Moving on to the possible effects of the genius myth on the quality of motivation, one may start by observing that the romantic ideology can potentially enhance a writer's 'internal' motivation which has often been positively correlated with artistic quality, also in terms of the ideal of 'personal originality' so important to the present discussion.

One of the most important theorists on the impact of different forms of motivation on creativity is Teresa Amabile who primarily distinguishes between

⁴²³ As is pointed out by Linda S. Kauffmann in 'The Long Good-Bye - Against Personal Testimony or an Infant Grifter Grows up: 'the argument that *women can only write about themselves* has been the cornerstone of sexist criticism of women writers since Sappho' Kaufmann, Linda S., 'The Long Good-Bye - Against Personal Testimony or an Infant Grifter Grows Up', in R.R. Warhol and Diana Price Herndl (eds.), *An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (Revised ed., New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1997), p.1162.

⁴²⁴ Ruth Noble, 'Womban' in Lesley Saunders (ed.), *Glancing Fires - An Investigation into Women's Creativity* (London: Women's Press, 1987), p. 21.

motivation of a predominantly intrinsic and extrinsic kind. Whereas the latter is concerned with outward incentives such as achieving wealth or recognition through artistic work, intrinsic motivation is related to an artist's desire to create because of more personal and internal reasons, such as deep interest in an activity and joy of creation/self-expression felt during the engagement with it. Based on this distinction – and even though Amabile acknowledges several complexities and exceptions of this 'rule' – she explains how motivation of an intrinsic kind is generally highly conducive to increased levels of creativity. At the same time, a focus on external aspects is supposed to lead to a decrease in creativity and hence – implicitly – also the quality of works produced.⁴²⁵

One may add that, although the question of artistic quality is, of course, a highly difficult and ambiguous matter, it nonetheless stands to reason that a predominantly intrinsic motivation is also more likely to lead to the ideal of 'personal originality'. For one can start from the assumption that individuals who are primarily driven by their deep interest in and joy of creation are far less likely to 'alter' their personal vision in order to achieve outward success in the form of noteworthy remuneration, literary prizes and so on.

Now why, then, may one regard a positive identification as potentially enhancing a writer's internal motivation? To begin with, a significant interrelation between the two may be found in the fact that this particular

⁴²⁵ Amabile's (and her colleagues') research may be best summed up through the following citations. On the one hand, she very succinctly outlines the basic principle underlying much of her writing in the following manner: 'Intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity, and extrinsic motivation is detrimental; as extrinsic constraints increase, intrinsic motivation and creativity must decrease.' On the other hand, she also acknowledges potential limits to this overall theory when she continues: 'Yet, as our research and that of others has begun to demonstrate, perhaps this formula does not accurately describe all situations.' (T.M. Amabile, B.A. Hennessey, 'Conditions of Creativity,' in Sternberg Robert (ed.), *The Nature of Creativity - Contemporary Psychological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 31). Presently, however, we are less interested in the necessary complexities of the matter as its overall principle of creation.

motivational orientation has been crucially connected to confidence. As Amabile highlights, drawing upon the writings of psychologists Deci and Ryan, two further important voices regarding the interconnection between a beneficial appraisal of the self and creativity: ‘strong and stable self-esteem seems to emanate from a strong sense of self, which motivationally means intrinsic motivation and more integrated internalization of extrinsic motivation.’⁴²⁶ Therefore, bearing in mind the various manners in which the genius myth may directly or indirectly encourage this feature, it can also be seen as significantly contributing to a writer’s internally oriented driving force.

Even more directly, however, the genius myth may also be regarded as potentially ‘chartering’ (and therefore intensifying and/or maintaining) a writer’s intrinsic motivation. In effect, returning to some of the basic traces of the genius figure as outlined in previous chapters, the ideology (despite its pronounced credo of eternal, post-mortem fame) virtually arises as a mythical manifesto of internal motivation, providing its commercially disinterested hero as a model to be followed. As might be illustrated once more by quoting from Immanuel Kant’s writing on genius and the production of fine art:

fine art must be free art in a double sense: i.e., not alone in a sense opposed to contract work, as not being a work the magnitude of which may be estimated, exacted, or paid for, according to a definite standard, but free also in the sense that, while the mind, no doubt, occupies itself,

⁴²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

still it does so without ulterior regard to any other end, and yet with a feeling of satisfaction and stimulation (independent of reward).⁴²⁷

Here, then, we find an explicit celebration of and correlation between art of the highest kind and a creative drive centred on an internal ‘feeling of satisfaction and stimulation (independent of reward)’. Given this ideological focus of the genius myth, authors positively identified with it are therefore far more likely to also endorse and attach themselves to these basic, creativity enhancing, motivational premises.

In order to provide an example of this, let us refer to the Nobel Prize winning novelist Orhan Pamuk. To begin with, the latter arguably reveals a strong identification with the genius myth, in his case taking the specific form of using great, already mythologised author figures to forge his own sense of artistic identity.⁴²⁸ This, in turn, seems to both enhance his self-confidence and re-enforce his internal motivation. Indeed, he declares in his introduction to Volume Two of the collected *Paris Review Interviews*:

As a young man I had, after reading Flaubert’s letters and the life stories of those writers I most admired, embraced the ethic of literary modernism that no serious writer can escape: to dedicate myself to art without expecting anything in return, to shun fame, success, and cheaply won

⁴²⁷ Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, SS51.

⁴²⁸ The following quote, for instance, illustrates how he used the figures of famous authors in a role-playing manner to create a writing persona of his own: ‘Just as I took their books as examples, I drew upon these writers’ varied habits, bugbears, eccentricities, and little quirks...For thirty-three years now, I have been writing longhand on graph/ paper...Sometimes I think it is because I learned in those days that two of my favourite writers, Thomas Mann and Jean-Paul Sartre, wrote on graph paper.’ Orhan Pamuk, ‘Introduction’, in *The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol. 2, p. ix.

popularity, to love literature for its own beauty...During my early days as a writer, when I lacked confidence and had doubts about my future as a writer, I would return to these interviews to bolster my resolve.⁴²⁹

As this quote shows, Pahlmuk's alignment with what is essentially a genius conception of the artist and his role,⁴³⁰ appears to have notably strengthened his confidence and aided his decision – strikingly internal in its motivational premises – ‘to dedicate myself to art without expecting anything in return’.

Having thus begun to glimpse at the enhancing effects of a positive endorsement of the genius mythology, let us now look at what can happen if an aspiring writer tends towards a negative form of identification. In fact, based on the premises now explored, it already stands to reason that the latter – instead of furthering an internal form of motivation – can become crucially erosive of it. One form this appears to take is that (instead of writing what they want to write) would-be authors can become overly occupied with the essentially *external* motivator of trying to find out whether or not they do possess an innate gift.⁴³¹ As the influential editor turned agent Betsey Lerner comments in her book *The Forest for the Trees – An Editor's Advice for Writers*:

I cannot tell you how many times I have been approached by aspiring writers at conferences who have asked me to tell them whether their pages show promise; whether they have any talent, or if they should give up. They might as well ask me to evaluate my two-year-old's finger

⁴²⁹ Ibid., p. ix.

⁴³⁰ Note the revival of many basic genius ideas during modernism as outlined in the first chapter.

⁴³¹ One may add that this ‘proof’ of their talent is, in turn, frequently regarded as a precondition for allowing themselves to pursue their creative desires, a matter to be more fully analysed in the subsequent section.

painting...the dictates of taste and judgments of others are often the least helpful to a developing artist.⁴³²

Thus, rather than focusing on a continued improvement of their skills, negatively identified authors can misplace their attention on an in some ways impossible quest to establish whether or not they are innately 'talented'. Furthermore, they often depend on an affirmative answer to this question for a basic sense of actually having a 'right to write'.

At the same time, a negative identification may also deflect aspiring authors from internally motivated creation (as charted so crucially by the genius myth) into other writing mythologies, such as that of the Writer's Dream of Wealth. Now, while this is not necessarily problematic with regard to all aspects of creation (the counter mythology, for instance, tends to contain a strong work ethic which may prove partially beneficial at later stages of production), it may turn out to be fairly debilitating at this initial and particularly fragile phase of creative development.

This process can be demonstrated with reference to a blocked, female stage one writer, I.C., who displayed the perhaps clearest external motivation of all interviewees, stating, albeit not without a certain sense of self-irony: 'my dream is to have a hugely successful novel published and a monthly column in a magazine or on a blog followed by millions of people, then I would go on TV shows'.⁴³³ Interestingly, this specific motivational orientation soon arises as largely connected to a profound lack of confidence. When asked explicitly why she wanted to write, the interviewee gave the following answer: 'Self-

⁴³² Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, p. 32.

⁴³³ Interview I.C.

affirmation. Always boils down to that doesn't it? So I guess ultimately you can take it all back to low self esteem.'⁴³⁴

This, in turn, revealed a considerable connection to a specific – and specifically gendered – form of negative identification. For regarding serious literature as a distinctly male dominated affair ('[it's] difficult to be an acclaimed author maybe because of the general male dominated chauvinistic attitude still prevalent...women are still not equal'⁴³⁵) she decided to throw herself into the production of popular writing, or, in her own words, 'trash'. As such – and with her characteristic sense of irony – she replied when interrogated whether being a woman 'makes it harder/easier/anything to be a writer?': 'Easier to be a writer of trash...So I am in a good position here.'⁴³⁶

In reality, however, she was not really in such a good position after all, stuck around chapter four of her novel and struggling to dedicate more attention to it. In fact, she admitted spending much of her writing time scribbling funny emails to her friends which, in clear contrast to her novelistic ambitions ('see, that is not urgent. It is not a statement')⁴³⁷ were internally motivated ('Now, when I write, I write emails to friends...these emails stem from an idea, from me wanting to say something').⁴³⁸ On the whole, then, her external motivation – connected to a deflection from a possible identification with the (masculine) genius ideology – does not seem to be a strong enough motivator to push her through this and the following stages of literary production.

If this may go to illustrate the harmful effects that may arise during this phase in the absence of a positive genius identification, we have also begun to

⁴³⁴ Id.

⁴³⁵ Id.

⁴³⁶ Id.

⁴³⁷ Id.

⁴³⁸ Id.

observe a potentially gendered dimension to this, which we shall now consider in more detail.

With respect to the gendered aspect of motivational quality, then, it is firstly crucial to bear in mind that, depending on their individual circumstances, both men and women may – of course – be primarily driven by external or internal aspirations. Nevertheless, research has revealed that an easy relinquishing of internal motivation for more external aspects (especially in the form of outward approval) has been found to be particularly common among women. As Linda Miller Cleary comments in her previously mentioned study on writing and motivation, “‘I Think I Know What My Teachers Want Now’”, referring to an earlier research project that led to her current investigation:

When I finished the study in 1990, a new question about gender and writing motivation was firmly planted in my mind: Why do young women so readily forsake their own purposes and interests in writing and lose intrinsic motivation for the process?⁴³⁹

While she discovered that, on the whole, the ‘successful male writers were more apt than the females to find ways to please themselves in school writing’,⁴⁴⁰ the girls tended to be predominantly driven by a need to please their teachers. As the article’s title suggests, this becomes summed up especially through the case of a

⁴³⁹ Miller Cleary “‘I Think I Know What My Teachers Want Now’”, p. 51.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

young girl called Tracy, who significantly states: ‘When I do a paper for a specific teacher, I always try to figure out what they want.’⁴⁴¹

Now, several possible reasons pertinent to our present analysis may be suggested here. To begin with, it is worth returning to one of this chapter’s key points that the very gendering of the genius myth makes it more difficult for women to identify with this ostentatiously internally motivated hero. At the same time – and remembering the interconnection between an inwardly oriented drive and high levels of self-confidence – all the previously mentioned aspects related to the genius myth which directly or indirectly undermine this crucial feature in women once again become of relevance here.

On another plane, however (and considering the constant interplay of outward and inward factors with regard to the matters discussed) it is also important to recall the previously discussed outward tendency to diminish female experience and deprive it of cultural currency. Given the fact that self-expression appears to be one of the key aspects of an inward motivation,⁴⁴² this trend may become severely de-motivating, blocking the writing process or channelling women into the production of works less authentically concerned with their lives.⁴⁴³

Furthermore, one may argue that the particular gendering of internal motivation itself is also to blame for some women’s ready abandonment of ‘their

⁴⁴¹ Id.

⁴⁴² The fact that self-expression seems to be a strongly internal motivator for writing can already be observed with reference to the previously would-be author I.C., who was far more eager to write emails to her friends about matters she really wanted to express than a novel that did not contain a message she personally cared about.

⁴⁴³ As the writer Mary Gordon states with regard to these potentially de-motivating inhibitions in operation: ‘It was alright for the young men I knew...to write about the hymens they had broken, the diner waitresses they had seduced. Those experiences were significant. But we were not to write about our broken hearts, about the married men we loved disastrously, about our mothers or our children...Our desire to write about these experiences only revealed our shallowness.’ Mary Gordon quoted in Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 33.

own purposes' as observed by Miller Cleary. In effect, it is a notable part of many women's social conditioning in adherence to their subordinate mythical roles as helpmates and the like to teach them how to *please* rather than focus on their intrinsic self-interest. In other words, it seems on the whole more socially acceptable to be extrinsically than intrinsically motivated for women, even though this, in yet another self-affirmative circle, then often works against them within the artistic field.⁴⁴⁴ As Elaine Showalter so lucidly observes in *A Literature of Their Own*:

for men, the gospel of work satisfied both self-interest and the public interest. In pursuing their ambitions, they fulfilled social expectations. For women, however, work meant labor for others. Work, in the sense of self-development, was in direct conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the feminine ideal. The self-centredness implicit in the act of writing made this career [writing] an especially threatening one; it required an engagement with feeling and a cultivation of the ego rather than its negation.⁴⁴⁵

Thus, there are also crucial cultural prohibitions at work – largely to do with women's alternative mythical figures as previously outlined – which strongly inhibit internal motivation, regarded as unsuitable for women's serviceable muse, helpmate and procreative roles.

⁴⁴⁴ See Chapter Three's discussion of how women's writing has often been downgraded not with reference to its actual content/style etc. but because it has apparently not been produced under purely internally-motivated circumstances, hence not conforming to the genius view's declaration of disinterest.

⁴⁴⁵ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 22.

As we have seen, then, there are again numerous reasons why the potential problems of external motivation associated with a negative identification may be regarded as posing a particular risk to many (aspiring) women writers.

Permission: Creating suitable circumstances and allowing oneself to write.

Moving on to this second, central phase during the initial stage of the creative process, let us first of all look in somewhat more depth at what is actually meant by the term ‘permission’. On the whole it refers to an internal acceptance of one’s desire/intention to write and a readiness to work with given circumstances to transform this desire into a concrete reality.

Underlying the idea of ‘permission’ are two basic assumptions. First of all – quite simply – that even though the idea of ‘complete dedication’ to one’s work has been shown to be a misrepresentative aspect of the genius mythology, one still requires a considerable amount of time and what may be called ‘mental solitude’ in order to write.⁴⁴⁶

Secondly, the concept starts from the idea that, even though a writer may – of course – not be able to overcome ‘all obstacles’, the creation of such time and solitude are at least partly matters of human agency, subject to individual decisions, prioritisations and so on. In other words, many circumstances allow for individuals to reshuffle them to a certain extent to create (momentary) conditions for creation⁴⁴⁷ – *if* they permit themselves to do so.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ Depending on a writer’s personality, working style and circumstances, ‘solitude’ does not necessarily mean having to be physically alone in a space but simply to focus, alone, on the task of writing.

⁴⁴⁷ See how Toni Morrison, for instance, often used morning and weekend hours to write, thus arguably prioritising writing over sleep etc..

After this preliminary definition, it is now of interest to analyse two particularly prominent manners in which the genius concept appears to interplay with this phase. These are the specific nature of the hero's personality pattern and the myth's inherent 'division of labour', providing 'him' with various forms and figures of assistance.

The genius personality

On a basic level it is worth observing that confidence, shown as so crucially correlated with the inward workings of the genius myth, appears to have a highly beneficial impact on the present stage of permission. After all, if people think they are extremely talented, they are also more likely to shift circumstances in a way that allows them to develop their 'gift'.

This is, arguably, further enhanced by what may be called the 'status protecting' qualities of the genius myth. For, albeit somewhat ambiguous in its own right,⁴⁴⁹ the previously mentioned notion that a genius creator is, at his most sublime, 'the most precious gift that Heaven can give to the Earth',⁴⁵⁰ can also help assure an aspiring artist with a positive genius identification that adapting oneself and one's environment to embark on a creative venture is, ultimately, a worthwhile endeavour.

Interestingly, as John Carey observes in his previously mentioned work *What Good Are the Arts?* with specific reference to the researcher on aesthetics

⁴⁴⁸ The previously mentioned psychoanalyst Susan Kolodny dwells in some detail on the matter of permission in her work *The Captive Muse*. As she, for instance, explains: 'we each use our environments according to our psychological needs, our capacities and fantasies, our unconscious ideas about what we deserve or are allowed. Some capitulate to environments that seem to invite defeat, others ignore such environments and go their own way.' Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 98.

⁴⁴⁹ As said, with associated personality features such as cruelty (see discussion to follow), mental instability and so on, it would be wrong to perceive of the genius hero as an unambiguously positive cultural figure.

⁴⁵⁰ See previous footnote Chapter Three, Carlyle, 'On Heroes', p. 13.

from a position of evolutionary ethology, Ellen Dissanayake: ‘Her argument is that human communities that made things special survived better than those that did not, because the fact of taking pains convinced others as well as themselves that an activity...was worth doing.’⁴⁵¹ In other words, and here only with respect to the workings of the genius myth, its intrinsic tendency to make art and its processes seem so mysteriously *special* appears to help convince others of its role and purpose in society as well.

On another level, the basic personality structure of the genius figure as described can become of particular assistance to positively identified writers during this transitory stage. Either mildly or somewhat extremely, the mythical pattern of the ‘solitary’ genius with ‘his’ anti-social tendencies to the degree of cruelty can provide justifications and motive-power to acts of re-prioritisation which may turn out to be challenging both to the writers themselves (e.g. when sleeping hours are affected⁴⁵²) and those around them.

In order to see how this works in practice, let us return to the example of Pahlmuk, who – in his previously mentioned writing – also refers to Faulkner’s declaration of artists’ necessary cruelty as consoling him over implicit doubts regarding his right to write in spite of immediate cultural and communal expectations: “‘An artist...is completely amoral in that he will rob, borrow, beg, or steal from anybody and everybody to get work done’...It was consoling to read these words in a country where the demands of the community came before

⁴⁵¹ Carey, *What Good are the Arts?*, p. 35.

⁴⁵² As the writer Margaret Walker narrates: ‘I have written mostly at night in my adult life and especially since I have been married, because I was determined not to neglect any members of my family; so I cooked every meal daily, washed dishes and dirty clothes, and nursed sick babies.’ Margaret Walker, Margaret, ‘On Being Female, Black, and Free’, in Sternburg, *The Writer on Her Work*, p. 101.

all else.’⁴⁵³ Thus, he evidently finds solace and support to withdraw from some social demands for the sake of his writing from Faulkner’s declaration of the true artist’s supposed self-centredness.

As to more extreme forms displaying this permission-strengthening process in operation, there are many cases of writers – from different genres – who seem to have endorsed the credo of the self-centred artist as a means of radically freeing time and space for themselves. A particularly interesting case in point – outlined by Tillie Olson in *Silences* – is the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who explains why he does not live with and work to provide for his wife and baby (nor much later allow his daughter a brief honeymoon visit after her wedding)⁴⁵⁴ in the following terms: ‘If I have any responsibility, I mean and desire it to be responsibility for the deepest and innermost essence of the loved reality [writing] to which I am inseparably bound.’⁴⁵⁵

If this strikes one as an essentially ‘immoral’ function of the romantic ideology, then one must remember that the myth also contains implicit means of morally bolstering such measures of establishing time and solitude for creation. For, remembering its determinism, there is of course an underlying notion that a *chosen* individual has little *choice* but to act in this manner. Also, and as has been said with regard to Carlyle’s previously quoted celebration of genius, such behaviour can be justified by being understood as hurtful to some yet potentially for the benefit of humanity. As one may – somewhat surprisingly – observe with

⁴⁵³ Pahmuk in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*, pp. vii-viii.

⁴⁵⁴ Olson, *Silences*, p. 15.

⁴⁵⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, quoted in *Silences*, p.16. See also George Bernard Shaw’s declaration in *Man and Superman* that ‘The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, and his mother drudge for a living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art.’ George Bernard Shaw quoted in Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, p. 121.

regard to Olson herself, who comments on her own example of Rilke's 'cruelty':
'Extreme – and justified. He protected his creative powers.'⁴⁵⁶

In this way, then, some of the arguably least likable features of the mythical genius feature such as his anti-sociability to the degree of meanness can actually be seen as chartering and helping to justify some necessary sacrifices (aspiring) artists may find themselves forced to make during this early stage of permission.

Mobilising help

Naturally – and as has been implied – the potential benefits of the genius ideology during this stage might also occur indirectly and without an artist taking any recourse to the mythical concept of the 'cruel creator'. It may simply yet significantly help to boost an author's sense of purpose and self, even to the extent that the 'problem' of permission disappears into invisibility. This seems to be the case with one male stage three writer (S.S.) interviewed, who replied when asked whether he ever doubted having a 'right to write': 'What can possibly be a problem there?'⁴⁵⁷

Interestingly, this very same author – a successful young poet and novelist – also mentioned that what helped him most for his literary development was 'the fact that I had the necessary four-five years "training period" during which it is necessary to work in a concentrated manner without getting any money financed by my family.'⁴⁵⁸ Given this factor – which seemed to have granted him time and solitude for his craft without too radical a reshuffling of

⁴⁵⁶ Olson, *Silences*, p. 16.

⁴⁵⁷ Interview S.S.

⁴⁵⁸ Id.

circumstances – it is perhaps a little less surprising that his negotiation of the permission phase turned out to be seemingly painless and automatic.

Now, what we are beginning to glimpse at here is that the stage of permission often relies on a particularly curious dynamic of outer and inner worlds, with the former occasionally stepping in to significantly facilitate (or hinder) the latter and where the genius myth appears to further motivate/complicate the creation of such a ‘helpmate’ system.⁴⁵⁹

This operation seems to rely both on the ideology’s status protecting function and its overall mythical appeal. Even though one is here forced to speculate, the high status of the serious artist may have played a significant part in convincing S.S.’s family to financially support him for such a considerable amount of time.⁴⁶⁰ Similarly, and as has been briefly discussed, famous literary helpmates like Sonya Tolstoy or Katia Mann – who spent a good part of their lives entirely dedicated to enabling their husband’s work – also appear to have been driven, to a considerable extent, by the attraction of thus entering the ‘mythical glow’ of genius.

Moreover, the potential contribution of the genius myth to a mobilisation of helpers during permission stage can be viewed as having a practical as well as a psychological dimension. To begin with, an individual’s ability to ensure some sort of help – even though evidently relying on some form of *personal* permission in the first place – is likely to result in a positive circle. For the very

⁴⁵⁹ In fact, such a ‘helpmate’ system can also, for instance, involve state and/or business sponsorship in the form of scholarships, grants, residences and so on. There the rationale behind funding a writer may, too, often be related to the genius myth, as for instance through a state’s decision to give money to particularly ‘talented’ writers or a business interest in arts sponsorship to transfer the ‘mythical glow’ of the genius ideology onto a specific product or brand.

⁴⁶⁰ One may add here that the young writer is quite radically anti commercial in his attitudes (actually naming ‘Hollywood’ as the most de-motivating element for his work), wherefore his parents’ financial support is unlikely to have been realistically regarded as an economic investment to back up a future bestseller in harmony with the mythology of the Writer’s Dream of Wealth.

existence of ‘an assistant’ may strengthen that person’s self-belief, therefore granting further confidence and permission. In this manner, one of the female stage two writers (S.C.) interviewed⁴⁶¹ explained how finding an agent was extremely helpful for her battles with permission occasioned by bouts of a negative identification with the genius myth. In her own words:

Sometimes [I have] doubt[s] about my own skill or talent, fear of never getting any results. They hinder me by making it harder to put time into writing when I’m tired or not happy....Having an agent has helped because it’s some level of ‘official’ belief in my ability.⁴⁶²

Here, we not only see precisely the interconnection between self-confidence and the mere act of *making* time for writing (‘doubt my own skill...harder to put time into writing’), but also how the insurance of outward help becomes crucial in overcoming difficulties with the reverse.⁴⁶³

In fact, Peter Wolson adds yet another dimension to the psychological significance having a ‘helpmate’ can entail, claiming that these frequently maternal figures can help authors overcome deep-seated fears of separation caused by the creative process itself. In his previously mentioned work, this becomes explained with reference to a patient, Mr. N:

⁴⁶¹ This author, in her early thirties, is indeed a ‘borderline’ case between stage two and three of the creative process, having secured an agent with her first novel but not yet – at least at the time of interview – a publisher.

⁴⁶² Interview S.C.

⁴⁶³ Of course, as has been hinted, we are once again facing the interconnection between the outer and inner world of (aspiring) writers.

Mr. N, an extremely successful writer and graphic artist, for example, could not face his typewriter alone unless he was completely taken care of by romantic partners according to his exact specifications. Without this encompassing maternal support system, in which virtually everything in life was done for him, down to the shopping, cooking, housecleaning, laundry, clothes purchasing, chauffeuring, etc., facing the blank page became too frightening and he would lapse into horrible depressions...when he lost his caretaker, his adaptive grandiosity collapsed and he was unable to create.⁴⁶⁴

Evidently, then, the availability of a ‘helpmate’ is presented with a practical as well as profoundly psychological dimension.

It is worth noting that the existence of a sheltering (female) presence also proved central to two male authors interviewed. The first case is a stage one writer, G.D., who was above all interested in producing work in collaboration with female artists. When, even due to basic practical circumstances, these co-writing processes fell through, the aspiring author did not write fiction at all.⁴⁶⁵

Even more tellingly, a male stage three novelist (G.P.) described how, despite his not uncritical view of the genius ideology in general,⁴⁶⁶ he absolutely needed a ‘muse’ in order to write:

⁴⁶⁴ Wolson, ‘The Vital Role’, p. 5.

⁴⁶⁵ This interviewee, for instance, narrates: ‘I had this project to write, “A trip towards the sea”, in Brittany, with an artist friend of mine. But then she could no longer do it, because she had to prepare an exhibition.’ (Interview G.S.). Instead of writing something by himself, this aspiring author – as had happened before when collaborations had been cancelled – ended up not producing any creative writing at all.

⁴⁶⁶ This partly critical approach to the genius mythology became evident when he stated, with regard to the word ‘genius’ itself: ‘I don’t like the word “genius” too much because it nowadays often becomes used in an inflationary manner, to crown the banal and the trivial.’ (Interview G.P.). Note that he does not, for instance, criticise the implicit ‘elitism’ of the genius idea, but

Apart from my friends and author colleagues (as I already said), I – and perhaps everyone – also need a muse, in whichever form, well, in my case in the form of my life partner/girlfriend. This can be inspired but also...devastating. In any case, it's absolutely indispensable for me.⁴⁶⁷

In fact, he furthermore explains: 'I normally don't have a problem with writing itself. Only when my former girlfriend left me one night without giving me a reason I remained absolutely speechless for nine months – at least, with regard to my writing.'⁴⁶⁸ In both cases then, their very ability and permission to write (although one must, yet again, allow for the possible involvement of other factors) seems to have been correlated to their respective ability/failure to conjure up a helping (female) presence as a basic, psychologically enabling force.

Having thus looked at the manner in which a positive identification might help an author negotiate the stage of permission, what happens in the reverse case of a negative endorsement of the ideology?

First of all, one must once more return to the crucial matter of confidence and observe how the lack of it, as pushed through a form of negative identification, may undermine or even destroy the necessary negotiations and re-prioritisations usually involved during permission phase. In other words, if aspiring authors generally adopt the myth of genius yet severely doubt their innate creative ability, they may feel little to no justification in restructuring their

simply the notion that it is – in a seeming allusion to the not uncommon market usage of the term – not deployed exclusively enough.

⁴⁶⁷ Id.

⁴⁶⁸ Id.

lives in any way that would make space for the realisation of their writing desires.⁴⁶⁹

At the same time, if we have also seen how the notion of genius can help to justify certain personal or social sacrifices, it is interesting to note how mistrust in one's ability may re-interpret the created reprioritisations in a near monstrous light. As novelist Jane Burroway observes in her diary on a work in progress:

I have 21 pages, unusable, unprintable, destructive of the books as my mind still sees it, contradictory of character and inconsistent in tone...I am not building a cathedral but a Dunkin' Donuts. Under Rilke's angst is the pre-war assumption that it is ultimately worthwhile to write. In this volatile, weak, irritable (and yes, timid is the right word) frame of mind, I am quite simply ashamed of myself. All those quirks of personality which, after great things have been accomplished, are labeled sensitivity, temperament, anguish of the artist, genius, are only, if you ain't a genius, irritability, hysteria, a bore and burden to your family.⁴⁷⁰

Burroway's doubts that she 'ain't a genius'⁴⁷¹ therefore becomes transformed into harsh self-criticism where certain re-prioritisations become redefined into 'unacceptable' faults such as being irritable, hysterical, a burden and so on. In

⁴⁶⁹ As Kolodny recognises, 'Our self representation may be such that we think, "Yes, I am a poet, I'm talented, and I have the right to be a poet." Or, "No, this is for others; for me, this isn't possible or allowed."' (Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 85) The latter may result in writing ideals never becoming transformed into possibilities.

⁴⁷⁰ Jane Burroway, 'Opening Nights - The Opening Days', in Sternburg, *The Writer on Her Work*, pp. 201-2.

⁴⁷¹ Note how this concept is further expressed by her complaint that she is creating a 'Dunkin' Donuts', associated with 'cheap' and repeatable market supply, as opposed to a 'cathedral' – monumental, lasting and generally more in tune with the sublime, spiritual world of genius.

addition, we may also note an allusion to a gendered double standard where sacrifices of one's family's needs form part of a male creator's bravado in authors such as Rilke, whereas in case of women as almost definitional anti-geniuses they can become associated with the 'typically female' malaise of hysteria.

Finally, instead of assisting aspiring artists in their efforts to mobilise help, a negative identification with the genius myth can ultimately turn aspiring authors into helpmates themselves. In other words (and as has been mentioned with regard to many women within the literary industry) their creative interest may become channelled into secondary roles of artistic production which more readily match existing levels of perceived ability and confidence.

This process was, in part, illustrated by a female stage three writer who, even though literarily active herself, was far more convinced by her husband's work (also a novelist) whom she regarded as a potential genius.⁴⁷² One of the many subtle effects of this was that she, for instance, promoted his work far more fervently than her own. As such, she recounted that, on meeting a very famous literary figure at a party who told her he had just read her work, she eagerly replied: 'You also have that of E'⁴⁷³ – her partner's.

Of course, several aspects mentioned during this discussion – the particularly gendered negative identification of I.C., the fears of being labelled 'hysterical' expressed by Burroway and this author's readiness to push her

⁴⁷² When asked whether she could personally relate to the idea of 'genius', she replied: 'No...I think I am a good writer, but not a genius. For instance, not because he's my husband, but even before when I read E.'s work I thought he was one of these writers who would stay beyond time. And this isn't false modesty, although maybe it's part of these insecurities of mine I mentioned before.' Interview C.G.

⁴⁷³ Id.

husband's work rather than her own – all point towards a gendered dimension of this phenomenon, which we will now directly turn our attention towards.

In her Paris Review interview, Toni Morrison explains, with regard to herself and other writing women:

It's almost as if you needed permission to write. When I read women's biographies and autobiographies, even accounts of how they got started writing, almost every one of them had a little anecdote that told about the moment someone gave them permission to do it. Which is not to say that men have never needed that; frequently, when they are very young, a mentor says, You're good, and they take off. The entitlement was something they could take for granted. I couldn't.⁴⁷⁴

In this quote Morrison already indicates a belief that the stage of permission poses particularly serious problems for women.

Evidently, this is not to say – as Morrison herself implies – that the matter of having a right to write is as unquestionable for all male authors as it is for the previously mentioned S.S., who could not understand how one could possibly have a problem with it. Indeed, and as shall also be mentioned during the final chapter of this thesis, especially men who for some reason do not fit the basic mythical premises of the genius hero also frequently point to certain difficulties related to this stage.⁴⁷⁵ Nonetheless, there are several elements of note which do

⁴⁷⁴ 'Toni Morrison: Interview' (1993), in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 2*.

⁴⁷⁵ As the male stage three author M.M. explains, with regard to his simple, small-town upbringing: 'I never said I wanted to be a writer, my parents would have looked at me as

seem to underpin Morrison's observation and which may be connected quite strongly to the operations of the romantic myth, both as an active force and a charter of overall patriarchal practices.

To begin with, the kind of status protecting mechanism of the genius myth described can (as we have already seen with reference to the stage one case study A.B.) be considered more directly accessible to men than to women, often adding weight to the former's literary aspirations while potentially ridiculing those of the latter. In addition, if it has been said that the darker side of the genius personality may help to justify reprioritisations to enable creation, this possibility may be seen as far less readily available for women, as Burroway's fear of 'irritability, hysteria, a bore and burden to your family' already illustrates. This is not only due to women's general deflection from an identification with an essentially masculine category but also because the feature of cruelty itself has been shown to be a strongly gendered one, as it most thoroughly clashes with the 'gentle' outlines of most alternative, female roles.

Thirdly, one may recall the previously discussed heightened probability of negative identification and lower levels of confidence among female authors to indicate that women are likely to be more susceptible to their damaging effects on the permission stage. In fact, Susan Kolodny points out how in many women low self-esteem and self-doubt intersect with previously mentioned external and internalised pressures pushing them into their subsidiary mythical roles. As such, she emphasises that numerous female writers have

mad...That's maybe the reason why I published my first book at 29, I simply couldn't believe in that, didn't have any models in my environment.' Interview M.M.

mentioned to me that they have precisely such struggles between their inner doubts (their right to do or the rightness of their doing creative work) and pressures from an environment, external, but also internalized, which emphasizes their responsibilities and the importance of being available to others. They may experience this strictly as a conflict between their wishes to make art and their love of their family, and not consider it also to be a function of internalized attitudes about their role as women. I have heard men speak of conflicts about creative work, usually having to do with whether they have sufficient talent or success, but not about whether they have the right to the time, the privilege of trying.⁴⁷⁶

Here, then, both a negative assessment of abilities and the mythical power of alternative roles seem to make this phase of permission a particularly difficult one for women. The gendered genius myth and the overall patriarchal practices it charts appear to pose an unnecessarily high practical and psychological barrier for many potential female authors to re-arrange their time, start writing, and pass onto the second stage of creativity which we shall presently discuss.

6.3. Stage Two: Execution and Revision

We have now reached the central stage where ideas become concretised and, ideally, a finished novel is created. This stage has been subdivided into the phases of Execution and Revision, based on the assumption that writers tend to produce first versions of their work which they subsequently alter to often

⁴⁷⁶ Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 110.

considerable degrees.⁴⁷⁷ In addition, the following analysis relies on the idea that whereas authors – on the whole – depend significantly on more visceral, subconscious forms of cognition (‘primary process thinking’) for the phase of execution, more rational thought processes (‘secondary process thinking’) are usually deployed for revision, given that the latter demands a critical assessment of the work produced.⁴⁷⁸ As John Gardner describes ‘the writer’ in his creative writing classic *The Art of Fiction*:

He⁴⁷⁹ writes by feel, intuitively, imagining the scene vividly and copying down its most significant details, keeping the fictional dream alive, sometimes writing in a thoughtless white heat of ‘inspiration’, drawing on his unconscious, trusting his instincts, hoping that when he looks back at it later, in cool objectivity, the scene will work.⁴⁸⁰

Execution: Developing ideas and writing a draft.

This first phase of stage two, then, is to be understood as the period during which the completed draft of a novel is produced and where most characters, scenes, basic elements of the plotline and so on become invented. It can therefore be seen as the part of creation most dependent on a multitude and multiplicity of ideas, which is probably why it has received most attention during general

⁴⁷⁷ The phases of a text’s writing and revision are often approached in a highly complex manner by individual authors (e.g. one author may revise every sentence, while another may only start to make changes on a completed draft) and frequently alternate each other (e.g. a new execution phase actually following revision). Nevertheless, an overall separate process of execution and revision seems to be deployed almost universally.

⁴⁷⁸ Again, individual writers, of course, also display large variances in their individual reliance on primary and secondary process thinking for the creation of their work.

⁴⁷⁹ Note how – returning to basic matters of gendering as previously discussed – the generic writer is here, once more, imagined as male.

⁴⁸⁰ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 69.

analyses of creativity and creative writing.⁴⁸¹ The following discussion will focus specifically on the manner in which an adoption of the genius myth can correlate with the negotiation of this phase through facilitating or impeding writers' fertile engagement with their imaginary worlds.

Primary process thinking and the 'importance' of one's ideas

One of the key manners in which a positive endorsement of the genius myth can assist authors during this first stage of a novel's concretisation is by helping them take advantage of the often daunting yet rich creative spoils to be drawn from primary process thinking.

The latter may be defined as 'an unconscious thought process arising from the pleasure principle, which is irrational and not subject to compulsion',⁴⁸² or simply a more irrational, 'visceral' forms of ideation. Even though not unanimously celebrated by theorists of creativity,⁴⁸³ numerous scholars and especially practitioners continue to insist on its importance for artistic creation. This may already be illustrated by John Gardner's claim that authors write 'by feel, intuitively...in a thoughtless white heat of "inspiration"'. Or, as Brande observes in *Becoming a Writer*: 'The unconscious must flow freely and richly bringing at demand all the treasures of memory, all the emotions, incidents, scenes, intimations of character and relationship which it has stored

⁴⁸¹ As mentioned, many creativity theories, such as Wallas' stage's model previously mentioned or Arthur Koestler's rather famous notion of bisociation most centrally hover around the conception of ideas as – for them – the seeming key manifestation of creativity proper.

⁴⁸² Pearsall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

⁴⁸³ In all of his previously mentioned works Weisberg (in an attempt to question the genius mythology and its emphasis on irrational elements such as automatic creation) has argued against the importance of subconscious cognition for creativity. However, this view seems to be based on the somewhat erroneous assumption that primary process thinking is a modern equivalent of the supposedly 'extraordinary' thought processes deployed by true geniuses, whereas it is actually a common part of humanity, accessible and *inevitably* (such as in dreams etc.) practiced by all.

away in its depths.’⁴⁸⁴ Thus – albeit, not necessarily drawn upon to the same extent by all writers – the intervention of primary processes may be deemed crucial for the successful production of fictional works.

As to the usefulness of a positive relationship with the genius myth during this phase of ‘visceral’ creation, this turns out to be not entirely dissimilar from the aid provided for writers’ quality of motivation. For the genius idea – so centrally concerned with ‘the magic of ideas’ – can be seen as a means of ‘chartering’ this form of thinking and preparing artists for its occurrence.

Indeed, Gardner’s use of term ‘inspiration’ – so closely connected to the romantic ideology – already indicates the way the mythology helps to interpret and describe these unconscious processes at work, ‘explaining’ and incorporating them as an intricate part of its mythical territory. That this may also have a strong enabling power can only be fully understood if we recognise that an immersion in primary process thinking may actually be a very frightening experience. As Kolodny describes, conceptualising this cognition as a form of regression:

[creative] work seems also to require that we give ourselves up at times to that inevitable and usually transient stepping or sliding back to earlier mental states or developmental stages that we call regression. It is regression and the feelings regression evokes that many who want to do creative work find frightening, and so avoid.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, p. 45. Among the countless possible examples for this emphasis on irrational processes, one may also mention Atwood who comments in *Negotiating with the Dead*: ‘The composition of a novel may be one part inspiration and nine parts perspiration, but that one part inspiration is essential if the work is to live as art’ Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 70.

⁴⁸⁵ Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 39.

The person inclined to believe in the mythology of genius with its focus on mysterious elements, however, is more likely to be able to tolerate and expect such regressive experiences, accepting them as part (and actually indicative) of their creative calling and role.

Such a ‘proud’ tolerance of primary process thinking during creation could be observed amongst several of the stage three writers interviewed. The female author D.A., for instance (previously discussed as displaying a highly positive identification), clearly allows herself to let her ‘unconscious...flow freely and richly’ in order to write:

When I sit down to write I write. I don’t need an idea. I don’t need a synopsis, a plan of characters. I just need a plot and to start. The story happens as I start to write. Quite weird...Usually I know where to end. But I don’t have a clue about the path I got to walk in between those points. And that’s the fun of it all. Characters present themselves to me in the middle of the way, like they always meant to be there: ‘Hey, don’t you forget to mention me. I’ll be useful.’⁴⁸⁶

Similarly, the previously mentioned male stage three writer, G.P. (who fell into a long silence after his ‘muse’ left him) commented about his creative process:

I believe in inspiration as something that happens to me while I am writing without having to actually become conscious of it – if it really comes from my subconscious or somewhere else, I don’t know. A large

⁴⁸⁶ Interview D.A.

part of the writing process feels as if I am transcribing what comes to me which usually happens faster than I can type (and it is unfortunately also better than what I eventually manage to write down).⁴⁸⁷

Of course, one always needs to take such statements of ‘automatic’ creation with a certain critical distance, understanding them as much as a public declaration of positive genius identification as a description of actual writing practices.⁴⁸⁸ Still, in both cases, the quality of these writers’ identification seems to enhance their ability to yield to more irrational processes, which appears to be beneficial to their overall literary output and creativity.⁴⁸⁹

But there is yet more to the transformation of primary thought processes into writing than authors’ capacity to access their subconscious. Apart from the absolute necessity of perseverance to be discussed, one must here also highlight the seemingly obvious yet crucial fact that writers then need to take the ideas that arise *seriously*.

How this, too, may become connected to a positive endorsement of the genius myth – so similar to the previously discussed phenomenon of ‘adaptive grandeur’ – has been explained by Wolson in the following manner:

The process of inspiration involves the grandiose feeling of absolute entitlement to follow your own bliss, to choose the material that turns you

⁴⁸⁷ Interview G.P.

⁴⁸⁸ In many ways, a declaration of one’s ‘automatic’ writing processes also seems to align authors publically with the genius myth, thus arguably making it more likely for their work and artistic role to be interpreted in such elevated terms. As a result, it is in many writers’ interest to present their work as having been mysteriously rather than laboriously produced.

⁴⁸⁹ One may add that the importance of such states is also due to the fact that, given the specific working aesthetic of the present thesis, they are also more likely to result in individuals expressing themselves with a maximum of authenticity. For dreams and thoughts which arise beyond a person’s direct control are likely to be somewhat more unadulterated expressions of his or her personal vision and identity.

on, and to reject that which does not; to feel like a god over your subject matter and your creative medium.⁴⁹⁰

Put even more directly in romantic terms, if (aspiring) authors feel they are potential geniuses or at least have what it takes to be serious writers, this is likely to make them trust their ideas and consider them important enough to be elaborated upon, in their work.

Finally, it is crucial to bear in mind that a positive connection between a genius identification and the negotiation of the execution phase can only be preserved as long as artists do not fall prey to the phenomenon of over-identification or ‘maladaptive grandiosity’. As Wolson, furthermore, points out:

With maladaptive grandiosity (omnipotence), the actively inspired artist may not be discriminating enough with his selection of material and believe that anything that stimulates him is appropriate subject matter, whereas the passively inspired artist may sometimes wait around indefinitely for some magical spark to inspire him.⁴⁹¹

Consequently, the benefits of a positive genius endorsement previously outlined can only operate, during this phase of execution – as indeed, all stages of the creative process – if it remains of a markedly limited kind.

As this warning already indicates, the genius myth can thus once again act as a facilitator as well as an obstacle during the phase of execution,

⁴⁹⁰ Wolson, ‘The Vital Role’, p. 5.

⁴⁹¹ Id.

depending on the nature of an individual's identification. Given that a negative adoption of the myth typically takes the form of the benefits' direct reversal, its detrimental effects will now be pointed out in a succinct manner, leaving their more detailed assessment for the discussion of their gendered dimension to follow.

First of all, then, negatively identified authors may either not feel entitled to let themselves 'fall' into regressive states of primary process thinking or lack access to the way the genius myth can charter and prepare writers to accept and even enjoy them.⁴⁹² Secondly, even if certain negatively identified authors are able to dive into subconscious forms of ideation, they may not possess the basic trust in their ideas' importance, discarding them as irrelevant and/or uninteresting. As we may remember from the previously quoted statement of our stage one case study writer, A.B.:

When you want to sit down and write, you're always plagued by self-doubt and then you sit down and think, well, that's of no interest to anyone, anyway...you start feeling intimidated because you tell yourself, I am not a, I don't know, Simone de Beauvoir.⁴⁹³

In this quote, we can clearly observe how lack of confidence strongly inhibits this writer when it comes to the execution stage, among other difficulties making her doubt if her ideas will actually be of any interest at all.

⁴⁹² In addition, it may be argued that too 'de-mystified' an approach to creativity as outlined by Weisberg or contained by the Writer's Dream of Wealth may become harmful at this stage. Regarding the production of artistic work as simply a rational and entirely controllable phenomenon may well end up curtailing much of the multilayered richness to be drawn from primary process thinking, as described earlier on.

⁴⁹³ Interview A.B.

Let us now address the gendered dimension of these matters and start with the very lack of confidence in one's ideas described. Here, we may initially observe that the whole bulk of the romantic ideology's charter myth operations (e.g. its narrative moral, hierarchy of male over female concerns etc.) make a negative form of identification a far more likely occurrence for women. In this manner, Tillie Olson observes in *Silences*:

How much it takes to become a writer...the will, the measureless store of belief in oneself to be able to come to, cleave to, find the form of one's own life comprehensions. Difficult for any male not born into a class that breeds such confidence. Almost impossible for a girl, a woman.⁴⁹⁴

Now, first of all, this quotation already points to the genius myth's implication in matters of gender as well as social class, to be discussed in the next and final chapter. As to the specifically gendered element, the relevance of this for a number of (would-be) female authors can be found not only through the previously quoted A.B., but also C.V. from the same interview group, who 'cannot rationalise away' the feeling that 'even if I know that I can do something as well as or better than a man, I would not have the feeling that it is as significant.'⁴⁹⁵

With respect to the phenomenon of primary processing, the access to this kind of cognition can also pose as a notable difficulty for many female authors, *despite* the fact that a general association of women with 'irrationality' might put

⁴⁹⁴ Olson, *Silences*, p. 27.

⁴⁹⁵ Interview C.V.

them into a theoretical position of advantage.⁴⁹⁶ Quite apart from the general effects of a negative identification on the execution phase as previously analysed, this seems largely due to the existence of social prohibitions against the kind of material such regressive states might produce in female minds. Indeed, one may argue that through unconscious ideation women are more likely to access a territory which almost inevitably contains representations of specifically female experiences, often regarded as ‘unspeakable’ or even ‘unthinkable’ under patriarchy. To further illustrate this, one might once again refer to Virginia Woolf who so poignantly describes this phenomenon in her text ‘Professions for Women’:

Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl’s fingers. Her imagination rushed away...and then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard...To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked....She could write no more.⁴⁹⁷

Here, Virginia Woolf clearly depicts how she starts to enter a primary state of cognition (‘her imagination rushed away’), only to find herself interrupted by a specifically gendered intervention of internalised censorship.

⁴⁹⁶ Of course, as the previous example of the female stage three writer D.A. illustrates, this is not to say that this problematic is relevant to all women, alike.

⁴⁹⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘Professions for Women’, in Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory – A Reader*, p. 52.

Interestingly, a similar problem was also described by a female stage three writer, A.G., who remarked:

I think that, for a lot of women writers my age...the matter of writing about sexual experiences is something very interesting which we want to do and actually do, but at the same time there is a very strong difference between what a man and a woman can write. Because, on the one hand, I think women feel a bit judged and they have scruples writing about certain themes – an attitude which corresponds to a tendency among readers.⁴⁹⁸

This quote clearly expresses a strong internal prohibition at work which, in turn, seems to lead to a certain inhibition of primary process thinking.

One may add that, as so often during this chapter, this internalised attitude does in fact have its direct outward correspondent. As such, this particular writer also shared the following occurrence from her early writing years:

I went to read my things, and at first it was very difficult for me to read, because I was afraid they were going to criticise it, I thought they would never like what I was writing. I went with people who were great poets, very established, and so I regarded them as much better than me...And added to this, they were men and I was a woman, so I felt like I couldn't reach their standards about what literature was. And so...they started

⁴⁹⁸ Interview A.G.

telling me, you see, it's very perverse what you are writing, and I felt very bad, because of this idea that my writing was perverse and it took me a long time to get rid of this.⁴⁹⁹

The fact that her writing was once explicitly qualified as 'perverse' in an arguable attempt to diminish her literary status as a minority female writer therefore seems to have considerably added to the inward censorship as explored in the previous quote.

In this manner, the interference of the masculine charter myth of genius during the phase of execution can be interpreted as particularly crucial with regard to what may be called 'content regulation'. It potentially encourages the free flow of ideas coherent with a 'masculine' vision of the world and discourages possibly subversive female counter views.

Revision: Revisiting and improving one's writing.

If the phase of execution has been looked at chiefly with regard to its heavy reliance on primary process thinking, we now move on to a stage of creative development where a more rational and critical cognitive approach – often referred to as 'secondary process thinking' comes to be of the utmost significance. After all, during the phase of revision, it is the authors' task to evaluate and thoroughly question their own work, before they are able to perform the necessary restructuring and re-writing which this process usually entails.

Given the rational focus of this stage and the fact that one of the mythical aspects of the genius ideology holds that true geniuses do not need to revise,⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁹ Id.

an adoption of the romantic ideology has generally been viewed as harmful for writers who have arrived at this stage of development. David Stephen Calonne states in his work 'Creative Writers and Revision' that 'The Romantic conception of inspiration...tended to ignore or minimize revision as the central locus of creative activity because composition presumably comes effortlessly to geniuses.'⁵⁰¹ Consequently, it has been assumed that this misguides authors into believing that their work comes out perfect at the first attempt.⁵⁰²

Now, while it is true – as has been implied – that this particular element of the genius 'doctrine' might potentially endanger a successful negotiation of the creative process, it must also be observed that such a literal understanding of it can, especially during this advanced stage of creative development, be viewed as a form of over-identification. In fact, an endorsement of the genius ideology which entails an actual refusal to revise might be best interpreted – given that the author therefore arguably also refuses to confront the 'faults' in his or her writing – as a defensive stance likely to be connected to a lack of confidence rather than a firm self-belief typical of a positive genius identification.

⁵⁰⁰ This is often referred to in relation to Mozart who – in mythologised versions of his life such as Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* – is supposed to have written his music without any need for subsequent changes, just putting down on paper what he heard 'inside'. As is stated in a review of the film with respect to Mozart's musical antagonist Salieri looking at these mysteriously created scores: 'Incredibly, these original and first drafts of the music show no corrections of any kind; it is just as if Mozart had taken down dictation from God! Salieri reads on, overwhelmed; he is maddened by their perfection. It dawns on him: Mozart has been chosen to be God's instrument.' Gregory Allen Robbins, 'Mozart & Salieri, Cain & Abel, A Cinematic Transformation of Genesis 4', *Journal of Religion and Film*, 1.1 (April 1997) [consulted at <<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/robbins.htm>> (accessed November 2010)].

⁵⁰¹ David Stephen Calonne, 'Creative Writers and Revision', in Horning Alice and Becker Anne (eds.), *Revision - History, Theory and Practice* (Parlour Press and WAC Clearing House, 2006) [consulted at <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/horning_revision/> (accessed November 2010)], p. 9.

⁵⁰² As the writing theorist Zerubavel recounts, within the context of his expostulated dangers of endorsing too romantic a view of creativity: 'When I was in college, I used to take great pride in the fact that I would hand in virtually unrevised term papers, and basically regarded "having to" write more than one draft as an intellectual problem I fortunately did not have. I have since learned the value of revision. Contrary to the common romantic image of the act of creating (and the creator as a "genius"), very few great literary or scholarly pieces are actually produced in one draft.' Zerubavel, *The Clockwork Muse*, p. 47.

Even though this may at first strike one as somewhat counter-intuitive, a limited identification with the myth can actually, once more, become an important psychological resource during the phase of revision. This is, for instance, the case if an author's concern with the genius ideal takes the form of a future idea to strive towards, thus operating as a guiding concept, bestowing a writer with sufficient confidence to trust in his ability to improve the work produced. As Wolson affirms with regard to this matter: 'In adaptive grandiosity, the work remains separate from the artist as something being formed, but the artist is extremely confident in his power to alter it.'⁵⁰³ Given this actual interconnection between a positive identification and a negotiation of the revision stage, it is perhaps not entirely surprising that even a romantic poet such as Robert Southey emphasises: 'It is with words as with sunbeams – the more they are condensed, the deeper they burn.'⁵⁰⁴

Apart from thus bestowing authors with a faith in their ability to improve their writing, a positive identification also seems to lead to an increase in persistence (such a crucial feature at this stage) and help to 'charter' the often lengthy path to an accomplished work through an implicit genius search for the 'perfect word'. As to the former, we may simply remember Bandura's previous observation that levels of self-efficacy determine 'how much effort they expend; how long they persevere in the face of difficulties.'⁵⁰⁵ As to the latter – the quest for the 'perfect word'⁵⁰⁶ – this aspect indeed often mythologises the revision

⁵⁰³ Wolson, 'The Vital Role', p. 7.

⁵⁰⁴ Robert Southey, quoted in 'Robert Southey Quotes', [www.thinkexist.com, http://thinkexist.com/quotes/robert_southey/3.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/robert_southey/3.html), World Wide Web Publication, accessed February 2011.

⁵⁰⁵ See previous footnote Chapter Five, Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy', p. 3.

⁵⁰⁶ See, for example, also Gustave Flaubert's famous obsession with finding 'le mot just' – the perfect word.

process, presenting it as part of geniuses' journey from tragedy to their sublime, literary triumph.

Let us illustrate this phenomenon both with respect to one of the aspiring stage two authors interviewed and a well-known, established writer. As to the former, the previously mentioned M.Z. (with 'this image of yourself as a great author at the back of your mind') emphasised that he is very much driven, during the revision process, by the need to 'tinker, the wish to say it even better.'⁵⁰⁷ With regard to the latter, Hemingway's famous comment in his Paris Review interview about the final part of the novel *Farewell to Arms* may act as a particularly demonstrative example:

Hemingway: I rewrote the ending to Farewell to Arms, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.

Interviewer: Was there some technical problem there? What was it that had stumped you?

Hemingway: Getting the words right.⁵⁰⁸

Rather than defining these authors as non-geniuses because they need to improve their initial drafts, they seem to be in part driven onto what, especially in the case of Hemingway, amounts to vast revision efforts, by a genius plight to find the best-possible or perfect form for their ideas.

If a positive genius identification can therefore be shown to be of assistance even during the more rational process of revision, a negative form of

⁵⁰⁷ Interview M.Z.

⁵⁰⁸ Ernest Hemingway, in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol. 1*, p. 39.

endorsement strikes one as particularly harmful during this phase. This appears to be largely the case because writers with this form of identification not only tend to lack a crucial trust in their overall writing ability but also in their specific capacity and tenacity to make necessary improvements on their drafts. In fact, it seems they often approach them not so much as works in progress but as dangerous tokens which may ultimately confirm their biggest fear of lacking basic, literary talent.

This potentially destructive phenomenon provided a notable inhibitive force not only for the previously discussed stage two case study writer C.S., but also for E.B., already mentioned with reference to her strong self-doubt and fears of lacking innate talent earlier on. In effect, she furthermore mentions how these very doubts seem to lock her in a negative circle where she begins to work on a given novel until she suddenly questions its intrinsic quality, abandons it unrevised and unfinished, only to embark on this same process again with a new novel which will come to the same end.⁵⁰⁹ In her own words:

I seem to start off very enthused, write quite a lot and then I reach a point where I'm just not happy with it...I'll reach a point, perhaps I feel the characters are suddenly not realistic enough or the story isn't 'big'

⁵⁰⁹ Another example of this pattern is explored by Kolodny in *The Captive Muse* with regard to one of her patients, a woman with a noteworthy 'early deprivation of self-esteem': 'After experimenting with many art forms and showing talent for all but stamina for none, this woman had begun writing fiction. She worked excitedly on a first draft of a novel, producing hundreds of unrevised pages while enjoying fantasies of book parties, promotional talk shows, film options. She then found someone knowledgeable about publishing to read her unrevised draft. She practically held her breath awaiting that person's judgement. He told her that her manuscript was promising, but needed work and lacked structure. Her mood plummeted. In this, she was like many writers at a first criticism, but then, rather than setting to work on revision, she despaired and became disillusioned about that particular project, put it aside, and began a second novel. Later, under similar circumstances, she would begin a third. Each followed the same course; she couldn't bear to revise; needing to do so somehow represented defeat or failure, the often referred to "narcissistic injury." If the first draft weren't perfect and applauded, she couldn't bear to stay with and work on it; she had instead to go on to something new.' Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 32.

enough to be a novel/ story and I'll drift....I think it's probably a fairly common pattern with me – I have a number of these works on hold...I suppose if it isn't finished it can't be judged.⁵¹⁰

Apart from the clear involvement of a fear of judgment in this writer's problematic to be analysed, it is remarkable how this interviewee does not interpret the fact that she is 'not happy with' her texts as something she has the power to change. Her low self-esteem (resulting in a lack of trust in herself that would allow her to face minor weaknesses) appears to indeed have been 'chartered' in genius terms as a fear of 'lacking innate talent'. This, in turn, gives power to a negative circle of initiation and abandonment which in some ways ensures that her 'talent' will not become proven through a finished and published work.

We have therefore come to understand that the myth of genius may operate as a means of enhancing as well as blocking the phase of revision. Let us then present some evidence that this, too, appears to contain a specifically gendered perspective basic to the ideology's masculine charter myth function. Now – apart from the fact that women are yet again less likely to identify with the gendered hero (with his quest for the 'perfect word') as a future ideal to strive towards, the article 'Gender Differences in Causal Attributions by College Students of Performance on Course Examinations' by Sylvia Beyer also indicates why it may prove more difficult for them to have faith in their overall ability to improve unfinished works.

⁵¹⁰ Interview E.B.

In fact, this study (concerned with the general matter of ability self-assessment) concludes that:

Gender differences in causal attributions and emotions for imagined success and failure on examinations were investigated. Males made stronger ability attributions for success than females, whereas females emphasized the importance of studying and paying attention. Males more than females attributed failure to a lack of studying and low interest, but females were more likely than males to blame an F on a lack of ability.⁵¹¹

This investigation, then, points to a tendency among many women to blame lack of ability rather than lack of work for the fact that they have not (yet) achieved a certain standard. Translated into the specific context of creative writing and revision, this would imply that they are also more prone towards regarding the ‘faults’ inherent in a literary project in process as a sign of their failure and lack of capacity rather than a necessary part of their work’s development they have the ability to alter and improve.⁵¹² In other words, inward and outward processes furthered and encoded by the genius myth appear to ‘mythically’ draw many women into a negative instead of a positive circle, even during this more ‘rational’ stage of revision.

⁵¹¹ Sylvia Beyer, ‘Gender differences in causal attributions by college students of performance on course examinations’, in *Current Psychology*, 17.4 (December 1998), p. 347.

⁵¹² One may add that what is furthermore remarkable about these findings is that more women than men did not interpret their actual success as a confirmation of ability – as might be logically expected given their common attribution of failure to a lack of it – but as the result of hard work. On the one hand, this may be taken to indicate a mythical process whereby even potential proofs of capacity (as discussed with regard to the stage two case study writer, C.S.) become ‘edited’ and re-interpreted to conform to a negative self-image. On the other, it is crucial to observe how this corresponds entirely to the findings by Spender that girls’ attainments in schools are often seen as signs of ‘mere work’, whereas low achievement is regarded as evidence for missing potential. This implies that we might be precisely facing a problem of women’s common internalisation of a double standard the myth of genius so heavily encodes and promotes.

6.4. Stage Three: Release and Reception

We have now arrived at the final stage of the creative process, comprising the subdivisions of release and reception. As the names imply, this is understood to be the phase where a finished novel is sent out into the world – in literary terms to agents and/or publishers – and received in a manner ranging from rejection to publication, also including the reactions (such as reviews, sales etc.) the latter may entail. Of course it has been stated that, exposing their writing to outward institutions, authors relinquish a considerable amount of control as to its subsequent fate.⁵¹³ Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that a writer's personal decisions and choices of behaviour during these final steps have no bearing on the actual outcome of the process' completion; and it is the way different forms of genius identification may interact with these that we shall presently address.

Release: Exposing one's work to the literary system.

For many writers, the experience of showing a novel which they have created in relative solitude and often out of their own, free initiative for a lengthy amount of time, can involve a feeling of vulnerability and fear. As the writer Philippa Davies recounts in her recent article 'Ouch! That Hurts - A Writer Fights Back':

Several publishers have published my non-fiction, but like many people I secretly yearn to publish a novel. I wrote one called 'The Gritties' and have lucked out with a most fab agent to sell it. But this 'sell it' is proving harder to do than say: the manuscript is getting repeatedly

⁵¹³ These last steps may indeed be regarded as a kind of threshold between the inner and the outer world of artistic creation, both of which have been of considerable concern to the present debate.

rejected. Even though in my day job I am used to ongoing and regular feedback, there is something about creating a novel that is so deeply personal and about who I am, that responses like ‘stereotypes with no clear insight’ turn over in my mind for several days. There’s no way round it – I hurt.⁵¹⁴

As this quote illustrates, the very fact of profound personal involvement which is typical of creative writing can make authors feel very anxious and susceptible to the way it is received. It stands to reason that this risky process (which might invite both praise and criticism) therefore requires considerable levels of confidence which a positive identification with the genius myth again helps to provide.

In addition, this form of genius endorsement and its resultant levels of self-efficacy also appear to become useful psychological tools for handling rejection (which Bandura in fact regards as the rule, rather than the exception⁵¹⁵ during this phase) given the previously outlined fact that a strong self-belief has been shown to considerably increase people’s ‘resilience to failures.’⁵¹⁶

However, the way the myth of genius can prepare an author to deal with rejections seems to go still further than this. After all, it has been outlined that the

⁵¹⁴ Philippa Davies (‘Mrs. Moti’), ‘Ouch! That Hurts - A Writer Fights Back’, *Mrs. Motivator.com*, 24 October 2010, <<http://mrsmotivator.com/2010/10/24/ouch-that-hurts-a-writer-fights-back/>>, World Wide Web Publication, (accessed November 2010).

⁵¹⁵ Bandura, ‘Self-Efficacy’, p. 5. In order to further illustrate this point, Bandura makes the following statement: ‘Many of our literary classics brought their authors countless rejections. James Joyce’s, *The Dubliners*, was rejected by 22 publishers. Gertrude Stein continued to submit poems to editors for 20 years before one was finally accepted. Over a dozen publishers rejected a manuscript by e. e. cummings. When he finally got it published, by his mother, the dedication read, in upper case: With no thanks to . . . followed by the list of 16 publishers who had rejected his manuscript.’ Id.

⁵¹⁶ See previous footnote Chapter Five, Bandura, ‘Self-Efficacy’, p. 3.

ideology contains a path ‘from tragedy to triumph’ in its very narrative structure. If one then adds that geniuses are almost by definition supposed to be rejected by their contemporaries and recognised for their true value only by a particularly ‘discerning posterity’, we recognise how the ideology yet again ‘charters’ the rejection process. It comes replete with a psychological buffer, ready to rationalise negative reactions to a work as necessary elements of a larger, mythical struggle. As the famous Mexican author Rosario Castellanos states it in her novel about writing and writers, *Album de familia*: ‘There is one defence against failure; the certainty that it is unjust and that posterity will rectify the error.’⁵¹⁷

Of course, one may argue that this can become a dangerous invitation for authors to deceive themselves and refuse to recognise their continued ‘failure’ as a hint that they should quit and do something else. Bilton affirms, although within a context of the myth of genius helping to perpetuate a system of authors ‘hopefully’ sweating away⁵¹⁸ for the literary industry that it may simply assist in ‘maintaining the illusion that success for the unsuccessful is just around the corner.’⁵¹⁹ While there is, evidently, a real risk of over-identification where authors use the myth of eventual success to minimise their own contribution to lack of publication (e.g. missing coherence, poor presentation etc.), this counter-argument loses power if we remember that neither literary ability nor value are fixed entities, wherefore authors cannot with any certainty be divided into ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ ones.

⁵¹⁷ Rosario Castellanos, *Album de familia* (Mexico D.F., Planeta, 2002), p. 48, my translation. Original in Spanish: ‘Contra el fracaso queda una defensa, la certidumbre de que es injusto, de que la posteridad rectificará el error.’

⁵¹⁸ ‘Individual artists, writers, and performers are the sweatshop workers of the creative economy.’ Bilton, *Management and Creativity*, p.19.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

What is more, several theorists have highlighted that among a number of usually unreliable predictors of success, one of the few that seems to be of any proven importance is actually that of persistence. In this manner, Betsey Lerner, for instance, concludes from her personal experience of authors' work life and success: 'I won't say there is no such thing as a natural talent, but after working with many authors over the years, I can offer a few observations...the degree of one's perseverance is the best predictor of success.'⁵²⁰ Consequently, one might claim that theoretically any measure which can help sustain a person's ability of perseverance, albeit it might strike one as 'delusive' to begin with, could be viewed as potentially beneficial.

One may even go so far as to claim that – as a means of maintaining motivation and resilience to rejection for authors during their lifetime – the myth of genius with its promise of eventual immortality (unlikely as the achievement of the latter may be) can paradoxically be regarded as far more sustainable than that of the Writer's Dream of Wealth. For – somewhat crudely put – it may prove far more difficult for writers to maintain a hope in getting published and earning money/getting famous through their writing than an ideology which – at first promising little more than constant rejection, poverty and so on – can, in a strict sense, never be proven wrong during an author's lifetime.⁵²¹

Indeed, as the following statistics illustrate, the odds against 'making it' as a writer in a more worldly sense attuned to the Writer's Dream of Wealth are extremely high. Dag Björkegren, for instance, explains in his previously mentioned work, *The Culture Business*: 'The odds are almost a hundred to one

⁵²⁰ Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, p. 35.

⁵²¹ Among the many 'genius stories' which help sustain such a belief one may - for example - recall the case of one of the most pre-eminent Italian novelists, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, whose celebrated *The Leopard (Il gattopardo)* was only published posthumously.

against the publication of unsolicited manuscripts, with which the major publishing houses are inundated.⁵²² What is more, with specific reference to the plausibility of economic success through writing, one may relate the case of the world famous author García Márquez, who – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – recounts that

From the moment I wrote *Leaf Storm* I realized I wanted to be a writer and that nobody could stop me and that the only thing left for me to do was to try and be the best writer in the world. That was in 1953, but it wasn't until 1967 that I got my first royalties after having written five of my eight books.⁵²³

Thus, if even a figure of gigantic literary standing such as García Márquez (whose high level of self-efficacy, incidentally, arises from his decision to become the 'best writer in the world') had difficulty financially sustaining himself through his work, one can imagine how challenging this often proves for writer of less critical or commercial acclaim.

Viewed from this perspective then, and despite the fact that the kind of eventual success envisioned by the genius myth is even more unlikely than that of the Writer's Dream of Wealth, it may prove to be more effective to identify with a story that preaches rejections as well as lack of remuneration as part of its mythical path. After all, as has been implied, it can lastingly supply writers with an emotional background of *hope* which, difficult to be destroyed during their

⁵²² Björkegren, *The Culture Business*, p. 52.

⁵²³ 'Gabriel García Márquez: Interview' (1981) in *The Paris Review Interviews*, Vol.2, p. 186.

lifetime, can encourage them in the continued expression of their visions and the production of literary work.

It has thus emerged that the myth of genius, when adopted in a limited manner, may be regarded as providing advantages to authors during their negotiation of the revision stage. Before moving on to the next and final part of the creative process, let us once more glance at the effect of a negative identification which, given that it again presents an almost exact reversal of the benefits discussed, can be dealt with rather briefly.

To begin with authors who negatively endorse the mythology may once more lack the confidence to persevere in the face of almost inevitable rejections, interpreting them as ultimate signs of their much feared lack of ability. Also, they often become deprived of the complex psychological buffers outlined above. Both problems were illustrated by the male stage two writer B.A. – the only negatively identified man at this interview stage. Interestingly, when faced with the difficulty of finding a publisher for his work, he was so thoroughly discouraged that he became both severely blocked and tempted to give up. As such, he not only stated that ‘the moment I put myself under pressure to publish, I just lose it [the ability to write]’⁵²⁴, but also that ‘I feel it becomes harder and harder to tell myself that my writing is actually justified.’⁵²⁵ Arguably, he lacked the often genius related self-belief which would help him rationalise rejection as a necessary step on a potentially sublime and therefore ultimately justified path.

Finally, if we remember the previous quote from the stage two writer E.B. who admits that her problems with revision are connected to the fact that if

⁵²⁴ Id.

⁵²⁵ Id.

her work ‘isn’t finished it can’t be judged’ as well as B.A.’s sudden writer’s block due to a pressure to publish his writing, we also begin to understand how low self-esteem and resultant fears of self-exposure may affect the stage of release in an indirect manner, preventing work from reaching this stage of development in the first place. Incidentally, we can also clearly observe how closely the different phases are interlinked, with a fear of reception associated with the third stage of the creative process here directly affecting the second stage of Execution and Revision.

As to the gendered dimension of some of the problems to be observed during the phase of release, we have already seen with reference to B.A. that this can be difficult for both men and women. At the same time, one may note that research has nevertheless highlighted an overall tendency for female authors to be considerably more hesitant about sending out their work. This has been manifested by the magazine *Mxlexia*, as it ‘commissioned surveys of fiction and poetry publishers and authors’ agents, which revealed that women are over fifty per cent less likely than men to submit their work for publication.’⁵²⁶

What is more – and this correlates with the previous findings that some women’s fear of the release stage may actually come to affect the execution and revision of their writing – a well-known study conducted by psychologist John Baer discovered that ‘when girls thought their poems and stories were going to be evaluated by experts, it “markedly” undermined their creativity compared with when they were writing without the prospect of criticism. For boys knowing their work would be judged by experts made no difference to their

⁵²⁶ Taylor, ‘Three Cures for Mxlexia’.

performance.’⁵²⁷In ‘Conditions of Creativity’ Amabile furthermore observes, with reference to a study by Cheek and Stahl ‘that poetry-writing creativity of nonshy women was unaffected by expected external evaluation, but the creativity of shy women was significantly lower under evaluation than under nonevaluation conditions.’⁵²⁸If this finding suggests that not all women are affected by the prospect of release in the same manner, it nevertheless indicates quite how crucial – and directly affected by the feature of confidence – the impact may be.

Naturally, one may again connect these findings with the myriad of discouraging practices operated and/or chartered by the genius myth as discussed throughout this thesis. In addition, it is worth drawing attention to the existence of further, specifically gendered barriers for this phase of release. To begin with – and returning to the impact of some of the personality features frequently accepted in men but rejected in women – we may emphasise that the very act of a woman publishing work potentially offends against an expected female persona who modestly shies away from publicity.⁵²⁹ In addition, and with regard to the previously discussed incentive of shunning worldly success for the possibility of literary immortality, this can hardly be plausibly and thus functionally adopted by women themselves. For we have seen how literary history has (apart from the handful of authors like Woolf, Eliot or Austen) tended to erase even the most accomplished women writers rather than granting them some form of eternal literary fame.

⁵²⁷ Ibid. and J. Baer, ‘Gender Differences in the Effects of Anticipated Evaluation on Creativity’, *Creativity Research Journal*, 10.1 1997, pp. 25-31.

⁵²⁸ Amabile, ‘Conditions of Creativity’, p. 34.

⁵²⁹ Author Mary Brunton, for instance, wrote in a letter to a friend why she rather had anonymity than take credit for novels: ‘I would rather, as you well know, glide through the world unknown, than have (I will not call it *enjoy*) fame, however brilliant, to be pointed at, - to be noticed and commented upon – to be suspected of literary airs – to be shunned, as literary women are, by the most unpretending of my own sex; and abhorred, as literary women are, by the pretending of the other.’ Mary Brunton, quoted in Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 17-8.

Once again, then, a positive endorsement of the genius myth can become a crucial asset and a negative identification a significant obstacle during this phase of the creative process, the latter being more likely to affect women writers and thus promoting the ideology's basic charter function from the inside.

Reception: The outward reactions to one's work.

Having arrived at the final stage of the creative process, this – as indicated – is chiefly concerned with the manner in which a work is received by a wider readership and the literary world in general. It has been said that, even though many parts of this particular phase are largely beyond an authors' control, they are still likely to be engaged with it on a practical or at the very least psychological level. It is with respect to these forms of authorial involvement, then, that the myth of genius can once again step in to facilitate or to impair.

At the outset, it seems that an author's positive and in this case especially *performative* endorsement of the genius myth can have a beneficial impact on critical/readership reactions. This is largely due to the fact that if writers publicly align themselves with the romantic ideology (and we may here remember the manner in which the myth can step in to orient self- as well as outward judgment) they are also more likely to be evaluated in adherence to it.

This phenomenon is discussed by the previously mentioned editor turned agent Betsey Lerner in *The Forest for the Trees*. There, she not only recounts how an author got into serious trouble with a bookshop for his outrageous behaviour during a presentation only to be very well received by the audience (precisely *because* he played upon genius-associations of true artists as 'enfants

terribles'⁵³⁰), but also comments upon the importance of self-promotion: 'Though we share a collective fantasy about the mysterious creation of art and poetry, more often than not those artists we do hear from are those most unabashed in staking their claim.'⁵³¹ Therefore, and once again somewhat paradoxically, whereas a romantic conception of art does not, by any means, stress the importance of self-promotion, an explicit identification with the genius myth may actually *result* in a form of 'self-advertisement', allying an author precisely with the mythical image of what a great writer is supposed to be like.⁵³²

Moving onto a more internal level, it is worth pointing to the fact that the feature of confidence, as usually bolstered by a positive genius identification, also appears to play a crucial role during the phase of reception and especially the way the latter may influence an author's renewed entrance upon stage one of the creative process. Indeed, self-esteem seems to have a considerable bearing on the manner writers interpret reactions to their work and their ability to retain a trust in their own judgement beyond the feedback and assessments received from the outside.

Some of these beneficial mechanisms can be displayed by looking at the previously discussed stage three writer G.P. – the author who fell into a long silence on the disappearance of his 'muse' – who replied when questioned if he ever worried about publication and/or possible criticism:

⁵³⁰ Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees*, pp. 262-3.

⁵³¹ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵³² In fact, it is a kind of truism within the publishing world (despite supposedly representing the ideological opposite to market regulations of literature) that a marketable (genius) persona can be of the utmost significance for a novel's receptive fate. As Chris Bilton observes in *Management and Creativity* with respect to the cultural industries in general: 'For the commercial creative industries, individual creative genius is a convenient method of branding cultural products and even entire businesses.' (Bilton, *Management and Creativity*, p. 16) In this way a (public) endorsement of the genius myth can thus, somewhat paradoxically, become a means of marketing and heightening a writer's success.

No, I am not scared of criticism, even though I have received reviews which declared an interest in ‘inhibiting my career before it even takes off’. In most cases, including the one I just mentioned, I think these critics expose themselves through their own ignorance and incompetence. You cannot completely destroy a text that is well done without compromising your own seriousness and integrity.⁵³³

Here, we can witness how a conviction in the worth of his work (‘a text that is well done’), as seems to become more firmly established through the author’s overall positive identification with the ideology, prepares him for the process of reception and arguably also his engagement with a new creative process to follow.

Remaining on an internal level, one may note that a negative identification with the myth and connected low levels of self-esteem, on the other hand, can make authors very vulnerable to the manner in which their work becomes evaluated. That this – in the light of lower confidence levels reported among women – once again presents a problem particularly prominent amidst female writers can be demonstrated by recalling Atwood’s previously mentioned study on ‘Sexual bias in reviewing’. It has been shown that the women questioned had not only experienced more instances of discrimination, but also seemed to have been more troubled by them. This has been implied by their often

⁵³³ Interview G.P.

writing ‘long detailed letters, giving instances and discussing their own attitudes’ whereas ‘All the men’s letters were short.’⁵³⁴

One may add that this interpretation of women – in general – being more likely to be affected by their reception can be further backed up by a finding of the previously mentioned psychologist Deci, which indicates that, on the whole, ‘positive response reduces intrinsic motivation in females, that females are more sensitive to feedback, and that they tend to experience praise as controlling of future efforts.’⁵³⁵ Interestingly, then, this suggests that even *positive* reactions to their work can be experienced as de-motivating and ‘controlling’ for many women writers, possibly in direct relation to their frequent lack of confidence as chartered and enhanced by the genius myth.

With regard to the public genius persona mentioned, a failure to (publically) act according to some of the myth’s basic mandates can result in a work’s devaluation, at least within the category of ‘serious literature’. As the French writer Pierre Drieu de la Rochelle, for instance, complains about criticism attracted by his work: ‘What seemed to legitimise the mistrust in the eyes of my judges was the variety of my occupations.’⁵³⁶ This can be interpreted as a sign that his *writing* has been doubted because of his lack of adherence to a genius persona, supposed – as we have seen – not to be driven by a ‘variety of occupations’ but rather by full dedication to one’s art.

Moving onto the gendered aspect of this phenomenon, we are now – of course – closing the circle of our present discussion. For as was amply discussed during Chapter Four, the male pattern of the genius hero and plot tend to directly

⁵³⁴ Atwood, ‘Paradoxes and Dilemmas’, p. 75.

⁵³⁵ Miller Cleary, “‘I Think I Know What My Teachers Want Now’”, p. 51.

⁵³⁶ Drieu la Rochelle, in *Gajes de Oficio*, p. 85, my translation. Original in Spanish: ‘Lo que parecía legitimar la desconfianza a los ojos de mis jueces, era la variedad de mis ocupaciones.’

impose themselves on the evaluation of female authors, often a priori defining them as inferior writers. As Dale Spender so eloquently comments in *Man Made Language*, in many ways summing up issues which have been central to this thesis as a whole:

It's useless to say I'm a writer...and a good one. I nearly said 'as good as a male'. And that's what I'm talking about. By definition you can't be a good *female* writer, it's a contradiction of terms. And the more you try to establish yourself as a writer the more you have to move towards being 'as good as a male'. That's exactly what I want to get away from. What happens if you are as good as a female? It's laughable, isn't it?... 'Excuse me, I want a job at your paper. I'm an excellent *female* writer. I have all the *female virtues*...in abundance. I'm silly, irrational, irresponsible...' etc., you know the rest. You just can't capitalize on being female. That way no good lies, you have to show that you have *male virtues*, and then, of course, you're trapped. Because you are *not* a male. You're a substitute male.⁵³⁷

Measuring them against an essentially 'alien' category, women frequently become locked in an essentialist game that is nearly impossible to win.

Therefore, we have once again arrived at the conclusion that a positive identification, more easily adopted by men, can enhance an author's negotiation of stage three of the creative process, whereas a negative form of endorsement, more likely among women, can significantly hinder it. What is more, we have

⁵³⁷ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 21.

also again emphasised how it is through the profound bias against femininity so deeply inscribed in the genius ideology – in many ways chartering basic attitudes of a patriarchal system at large – that the latter ends up setting up categories and standards which constantly perpetuate this bias. This is done both from the outside as well as the inside, in an almost unbreakable, masculine circle.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter we have thus illustrated how, even when looked at from a more detailed perspective of analysing each step of the creative process, the charter myth of genius may be regarded as fulfilling its function of continually pushing the perceived supremacy of male over female writers. It does so by on the whole enhancing the artistic process (and reception) of men and hindering that of women in connection to a myriad of elements such as the quality of creative motivation, access to primary processing, faith in one's ability to revise, among many more. Of course – and even though this has already been mentioned – it cannot be overstated that this is never to mean that men have on the whole written 'better' literature than women. Still, they have, in general, been given more access to internal and external resources which help manage the many difficulties implicit in the writing and publication of a novel.

In fact, it is important to re-emphasise that this phenomenon must be seen as coming about through the continuous interplay of both outward and inward factors as discussed throughout this thesis. Consequently, one seems to be facing a situation where women have not only often been subject to a variety of *added* problems to the struggles already inherent in the creative process, but also – usually through the phenomenon of internalisation previously described – been

most deprived (individually or as a group) of the internal resources to deal with them.

As to resultant implications of and potential remedies for this overall dynamic, this is a matter which will be discussed, after a brief summary of this thesis as a whole, during the subsequent – and final – chapter.

Chapter Seven: Ways Forward and Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

During the course of this thesis, it has been illustrated that the notion of artistic genius, especially within the field of novel writing, can indeed be regarded as a contemporary, Western charter myth which ‘expresses, enhances and codifies’ a lasting cultural belief in the inherent superiority of male and inferiority of female creators. It has been shown how this is achieved by the myth’s operations both on an outward level – by helping to bias the very manner in which work is received – and inwardly, by directly or indirectly affecting the creative process.

This conclusion – one may briefly recapitulate – has been reached in the following manner. Firstly, after a general introduction to the matters at hand during Chapter One, the first part of this thesis, ‘In-Genius Circles’, dwelt on the theoretical bases for the charter myth function of genius, as well as its outward effects on women writers. In this manner, Chapter Two focused on an analysis as to why one may better comprehend the nature and workings of the genius ideology by approaching it as an actual ‘myth’. In fact, it has been discussed that it may be regarded as mythical on different yet intrinsically interrelated levels, namely by presenting an essentially false (yet nonetheless often self-affirmative) interpretation of the three Ps – person, process and product – of creativity and by containing a pattern for an intensely mythical protagonist and tale. In addition, the second chapter has begun to describe how this mythical nature in many ways comprises the essence of the genius ideology’s charter function, not only contributing to the notion’s somewhat paradoxical longevity and resistance to

deconstruction, but also by providing an attractive cognitive tool for identifying ‘great authors’ and for (aspiring) writers to identify with.

During the subsequent Chapter Three, it has been illustrated how the charter myth operations of genius are further enabled through its profound (and often subliminal) gendering which subtly yet powerfully proposes a distinctly masculine body for its pattern for outward and inward identification, while at the same time containing – at its mythical ‘periphery’ – a series of subordinate or antagonistic counter-images for women. This, in Chapter Four, has been manifested to frequently influence the way works by women and men are received. It superimposes the appealing cognitive category of the heroic male and the subsidiary female creator onto the evaluation processes of literature so that the myth’s underlying assumptions of masculine superiority and female inferiority can persistently (and cyclically) affirm themselves.

The subsequent part, ‘A Circle Within’, has then been concerned with the original core of this thesis, namely the inward workings of the genius myth. Thus, Chapter Five analysed how the idea of – put somewhat extremely – ‘hyping’ the reception of many novels by men and ‘tainting’ those by women has its equivalent on an inward, psychological level, influencing the very manner in which the respective ‘sexes’ approach creation. It has been outlined that this inward operation of enabling/hindering literary development is connected to the genius concept’s intrinsic gendering on multiple levels, as well as to a close interrelation between different types of authorial identification (especially those of a positive and negative kind) with the mythical figure and the creatively significant feature of confidence. In addition, the chapter presented some crucial

findings from the interviews and three detailed case studies, illustrating how the psychological impact of genius manifests in individual lives.

Chapter Six then took this idea of the inward workings of genius further, by analysing – with continued reference to the interviews conducted as well as the personal statements of a large number of different writers – how the myth's enabling and hindering features affect each separate stage of the creative process. With detailed references to the phases of (1) Volition/Permission, (2) Execution/Revision and (3) Release/Reception it has been depicted how it crucially interplays not only with levels of confidence previously mentioned, but also with other important and often related features directly involved in the creative process. Among these, some of the most prominent matters have been the myth's influence on the quality of motivation, the ability to access the more visceral cognitive form of primary processing and on individuals' resistance to rejection – to name only a few. Moreover, this chapter has once again illustrated how, on the whole, the impact of the genius tale tends to be of a predominantly positive kind for men and destructive for many women, therefore once again confirming the masculine circle from within.

In other words, then, it has become manifest that it is through the gendered image of genius as well as overall patriarchal practices which the myth 'charters' and symbolises, that both the reception of writers and their creative process become influenced to continually promote a notion of male writers as better and, in the spirit of the working aesthetic of personal originality outlined, more 'authentic' writers. What is more, it has been indicated that this cyclical operation may not only be seen as a way of perpetuating the common belief in the inherent inferiority of women as a way of justifying lastingly discriminative

practices against them, but also as a means of regulating their cultural impact and pushing a literary world vision – arguably so crucial for a maintenance of a patriarchal system – according to a predominantly male point of view.

Over the course of this seventh and final chapter, it is now our aim to outline some crucial implications of the matters discussed. Section 7.2., ‘Limitations and suggestions for future research’, will – as the title already indicates – discuss some limitations inherent in this study and ideas for further investigations on issues related to this thesis’ core themes. The following and final Section 7.3., ‘Implications of findings and ways forward’, will present an analysis of potential ways of addressing the problems for many women created by the charter myth function of genius. It will be emphasised that even though a further or more widely promoted deconstruction of the romantic ideology may strike one as the simplest and most obvious ‘solution’ to counter-act female discrimination within the literary field, great care has to be taken not to lose many of the crucial mythical functions the genius notion has been able to deploy for creators in an increasingly alienated, market-driven (literary) world.

7.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Starting thus with some of the inevitable restrictions of this research, two aspects strike one as being of particular significance. First of all, one may re-emphasise that this thesis has predominantly focused on a systematic approach to the outward and inward workings of the genius myth. Consequently, it occasionally relied on (founded) generalisations which nevertheless cannot always fully represent the countless complexities and exceptions the underlying individuality of writers and their processes imply. However, a decision to do so

was based on the necessity to tease out precisely the structural workings of the romantic ideology. In this manner, it could emphasise their perhaps even surprising pervasiveness, especially in times where so many problems related to gender are believed to have become outdated and where, arguably, the very fear of generalisation may help relegate them into dangerous, undiagnosed, silence.

In order to deepen the necessary generality of a principally systematic outline, one may point towards an arising need for more detailed analyses of some of the effects of the genius myth, especially those of an inward, psychological nature, such as, for instance, the impact of a negative form of genius identification on permission, primary process thinking or persistence.⁵³⁸ Also of interest would be a closer look at particular geographic and/or demographic segments' endorsement of the genius ideology, perhaps within an essentially comparative frame (e.g. contrasting nations, age groups and – of especial relevance given the religious overtones of the genius myth – cultures with different dominant creeds, including varying denominations within Christianity).

Furthermore, and even though a considerable amount of work has already been done to recover lost female writers in English, there still appears to be a notable gap regarding similarly extensive efforts in many other literatures (such as those in Spanish⁵³⁹ or German) which clearly call for future investigative efforts.

⁵³⁸ This could even take the form of specific experiments within the field of cognitive psychology, for instance testing the effect of explicitly or subliminally pushing different kinds of genius identification among writers and evaluating their influence on the management of the creative process/performance.

⁵³⁹ As Lou Charnon-Deutsch, for example, emphasises in 'Gender and Beyond - Nineteenth Century Spanish Women Writers': 'The process of reassessing a feminine tradition begins with a search, discovery, reediting and reevaluation of what has been excluded from the predominantly male canon. In the case of Spain, this process is still in its initial phase.' Lou Charnon-Deutsch 'Gender and Beyond - Nineteenth Century Spanish Women Writers', in *The Cambridge*

These measures, then, might help to further nuance the predominantly systematic approach to some of the core matters discussed. At the same time, one also needs to consider that both a process of generalisation and the detailed analysis of one particular place indicated by such a conceptual map naturally bear inherent limitations when it comes to comprehending a complex reality as a whole. In this manner, one may add that not only the systematic approach to the genius idea and its mythical function, but also the decision to focus specifically on its effect on women novelists can be regarded as a necessary limitation which opens up crucial spaces for further explorations.

With respect to a possible amplification of the research provided, then, illuminating findings could – for example – not only result from additional quantitative investigations into the matters discussed but especially from an analysis of the genius myth's charter operations within different areas of creative endeavour and/or among other groups excluded from its normative ideology.

Starting with the former, if this thesis has – due to its specific aims – relied on a qualitative interview process to test out the complex and often individual effects of the genius myth, additional quantitative questionings may help to further test the wider applicability of different forms of genius identification and their impact.

As to research into other creative fields – and even though there are already some pre-existent studies in this area⁵⁴⁰ – it would indeed be of considerable interest to investigate the ideology's influence, both outwardly and

Companion to the Spanish Novel - from 1600 to Present, Turner Harriet and Adelaida López de Martínez (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.122.

⁵⁴⁰ See, for instance, the recovery work of Diana Ambache, as presented in 'Diana Ambache on Women Composers', *Ambache*, <<http://oboeclassics.com/~oboe3583/ambache/women.htm>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed September 2010 or Diana Jezic and Elizabeth Wood, *Women Composers - The Lost Tradition Found* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988).

inwardly, on women working within artistic areas such as painting and composition. Here, the latter strikes one as having been particularly prone to an all-masculine bias, virtually even dispensing with the token female genius so crucially part of the myth's operation among novelists.

Also, one has to remember that the protagonist and story of the genius myth is not only profoundly gendered, but also 'coloured' and 'classed', with traditional 'geniuses' on the whole being drawn from a pool of white, upper-middle class males. In this manner, Virginia Woolf, for instance, declares in her work *A Room of One's Own*, portraying a deep *social* bias inherent in the creative hero's image: 'genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people...It is not born today among the working classes.'⁵⁴¹

It has briefly been remarked upon with reference to 'best book' lists that some of these additional prejudices appear to be changing more readily than those related to gender. Nevertheless, it seems that some of the genius myth's basic charter operations take on a similar functionality with regard to *all* those not belonging to the restricted, normative group it prescribes. Evidence for the myth's potentially harmful effect on other excluded groups can be drawn from different writers and theorists. As such, novelist Richard Price – not unlike the stage three writer M.M. previously mentioned – declares in a *Paris Review* interview: 'I always wanted to be a writer, but coming from a working-class background it was hard to feel I had that right.'⁵⁴² In this statement, we can observe how Price's social background clashes with the typically upper-middle class origin of the mythical protagonist, thus – in a manner similar to women

⁵⁴¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 62-3.

⁵⁴² 'Richard Price: Interview' (1996), in *The Paris Review Interview, Vol. 1*, p. 381.

who fail to identify with the romantic hero on the basis of their sex – leading to a considerable struggle with the phase of permission.

With respect to the ideology's implicit racial restrictions, Susan Kolodny recounts how a black student significantly battled with the stage of execution, largely because his skin colour departs from that of the mythical protagonist and the majority of his canonised incarnations:

His own material or content, his inner life, perhaps as a black man in a society that devalued him and his experience, and certainly did not expect him, during that historical time at least, to make art of it, had not seemed to him interesting or worthy enough to be written about. Certainly nothing of his own experience seemed to him to be related to what he'd been exposed to thus far under the rubric of literature.⁵⁴³

As a matter of fact, by making this man feel that 'his experience' is not 'worthy enough to be written about' we seem to once again be faced with a mythical 'content regulation' at work, where counter-narratives to the genius' predominantly male, white, upper-middle class point of view often become subliminally discouraged from being produced in the first place.⁵⁴⁴

Still, it is important to add that further research into interconnected matters of mythical representation, confidence, power and opportunity, would also have to pay attention to significant differences in the way the romantic ideology operates with regard to gender, race and class. Also, it would have to

⁵⁴³ Kolodny, *The Captive Muse*, p. 9.

⁵⁴⁴ What is more – just like with women writers – one may start from the assumption that the literary field occasionally celebrates a token 'genius' descending from these excluded groups, once again resulting in a false notion that it is, in fact, a category open to all.

tease out the complexities of their multiple interactions, e.g. in the case of a black, female, working class writer.

On the whole, then, the dual limitations of generalisation and specification of the present research – arguably implicit in any attempt to approach a reality in its overall operations as well as individual complexities – may be seen as leading to a variety of further investigations into the Malinowskian functions of the genius myth.

7.3. Implications of findings and ways forward

Having thus summarised the overall conclusions reached by this thesis and outlined some related limitations and arising possibilities for future research, it is time to address the implications of the study conducted and the question as to which steps, if any (given the magnitude of the problem the genius myth poses for women writers) could be taken to somewhat alleviate the issues exposed.

If it will, on the one hand, arise quite how complex and difficult various interventions seeking changes to the persistent genius status quo can turn out to be, one may add that it is still of paramount significance to consider their varying potentialities. Indeed, one might here mention Jim McGuigan's objection against analysing only immediately viable measures for fear of being unrealistic or prematurely accepting a problematic state of affairs without any propositions for change. As he declares in his work *Rethinking Cultural Policy*:

Perhaps this is 'reality' and, undoubtedly, it is wise to be 'realistic'. No reality, however, is given once and for all in social and cultural affairs. It

is always a construction, the product of multiple determinations, and historical and changeable phenomenon.⁵⁴⁵

In many ways, then, it strikes one as wiser to arguably follow a kind of ‘reasoned utopianism’ as suggested by McGuigan with reference to Bourdieu,⁵⁴⁶ rather than prematurely accepting, without an analysis of potential alterations, a difficult cultural ‘reality.’

Deconstruction?

One of the first suggestions for a possible alteration of the present state of affairs would – somewhat self-evidently – be a continued deconstruction of the genius mythology as well as a wider dissemination of the many already existent works based on such a questioning approach. This should take place at schools, universities, cultural gate keeping institutions and those concerned with the formation and implementation of varied cultural policies.

Within creativity studies, three different yet intrinsically related measures may be suggested. First of all – and on a general level – much could be gained from further tearing down a continued barrier between different scholarly approaches to aesthetic productivity. Psychological studies such as those by Howe, Weisberg, Boden could, for instance, be immensely enriched by taking into consideration more humanities oriented investigations into the profoundly inscribed masculinity of the normative artist figure (such as Battersby’s or Korsmeyer’s previously mentioned). This would arguably help avoid a situation where – occasionally within this field of psychological investigations – artists

⁵⁴⁵ McGuigan, *Rethinking Cultural Policy*, p. 43.

⁵⁴⁶ Bourdieu quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.

and creativity end up being investigated without a thorough questioning of the ideological categories underlying the phenomena assessed.

Secondly – and in direct relation to the fact that the vast majority of artists studied have tended to be male – there is still a considerable gap in research about women and creativity. As has partly been shown, a number of such studies already do exist.⁵⁴⁷ Nevertheless, it would be of great interest to further interrogate matters such as different strategies female artists have deployed to counteract discouragement or common artistic inhibitions among women who are or would like to be (more) creatively active. Also, it would be useful to simply produce more studies on the creative process in all its complexities with regard to the way it manifests in women's internal and external lives.

Thirdly – and arguably in a continued reliance on a genius-associated definition of creativity as innovation⁵⁴⁸ – the field also tends to, on the whole, favour research into 'inventive' (such as writing, composition etc.) over 'interpretative' (such as acting or dance) art forms. Indirectly, this ends up re-enforcing its gendering (as well as 'racing' and 'classing') in its own right, ignoring many forms of creative expression which (partly through their hierarchically lower status as more physical or ephemeral arts) have been more accessible for groups excluded from the genius myth. Very significant insights

⁵⁴⁷ See, for example, Ravenna's previously mentioned 'Creativity in Women' or Kristeva's *Female Genius*.

⁵⁴⁸ As Amabile states in 'The Conditions of Creativity': 'Like most creativity researchers, we rely on a product definition: A product is viewed as creative to the extent that it is both a novel response and an appropriate, useful, correct, or valuable response to an open-ended task.' (Amabile, 'Conditions of Creativity', p. 14.) While this is a useful definition in many ways, we can also see how such a novelty and product-oriented view is by no means easily applicable to art forms such as acting or musical performance.

could therefore be gained from a re-shifting of this balance and producing more studies into the specific nature of the creative process within the performing arts.

As to other relevant areas of research, such as literary studies, both at a general and higher educational level, a necessary change would involve addressing a situation where, as gender theorist Kimmel puts it, ‘every course that doesn’t have the word *women* in the title is about men. Every course that isn’t “woman’s studies” is de facto a course in “men’s studies”.’⁵⁴⁹ In other words, it would be crucial to radically increase the presence of women’s work and discussions of women’s writing conditions in school and university literature courses and not, as still frequently appears to be the case, mainly deal with these matters in specialised programmes which – typically attended by women⁵⁵⁰ – may end up preaching only to the converted.

Naturally, such an improvement – although potentially powerful in its effect to remedy some of the harms done to women writers through the workings of the genius myth – is likely to be met with considerable resistance.⁵⁵¹ Therefore, it must be regarded (as most concrete interventions of this kind) as involving its own complexities and problems. Nonetheless, one may – somewhat crudely – suggest that a refusal to yet more thoroughly than hitherto address the continued dominance of works by men on literature courses would in many ways

⁵⁴⁹ Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, p. 6.

⁵⁵⁰ See, for instance ‘Girl’s Only? Is Gender Studies a Woman-Only Game?’, *Scholarista*, 10 September 2010, <<http://scholaristas.wordpress.com/2010/09/10/girls-only-is-gender-studies-a-women-only-game/>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed November 2010.

⁵⁵¹ In her work *The Writing or the Sex*, Spender provides ample evidence for the manifold forms of resistance against a stronger inclusion of women’s works on literary syllabi. One may, for instance, highlight the following excerpt from a conversation between Spender and a male academic within literary studies: ‘*Male academic*: Even if there were more women novelists in the nineteenth century, and I have reasons to believe that to be the case, they wrote about domestic matters, not about the human condition. *Dale Spender*: How many have you read? *MA*: I think it’s a case of if you’ve read one, you’ve read them all.’ Spender, *The Writing or the Sex*, pp. 196.

end up undermining the full validity and authenticity of the knowledge presented and gained on such courses itself.

On another plane, it would be of considerable importance for cultural policy makers and executioners on all levels – and especially those involved in training and enabling processes for writers and artists in general – to become yet more profoundly acquainted with theories analysing and questioning the genius view. This should be done both with regard to its false yet potentially supportive assumptions about creativity and its frequently harmful gender operations.

There are two main – and largely connected – reasons for this. Firstly, the strikingly pervasive if often ambiguous attachment to the genius view within this field⁵⁵² encourages the adoption of measures and strategies which focus too much on the removal of obstacles for a minority externally identified with the mythical hero. In this way, it continues to leave behind those who do not so easily fit the implicitly biased categories of ‘high art’, ‘outstanding talent’ and so on. As Margaret Boden, for instance, observes in her work *The Creative Mind*:

⁵⁵² Not unlike the views of many interviewees, a variety of institutions concerned with the promotion of culture and training of future artists appear to have both included some elements which depart from a traditional genius view while at the same time powerfully sticking to others, such as – especially – the idea of talents and gifts. In this manner, the British Council declares in a core statement presented on its website that: ‘Our global arts team works with the best of British creative talent to develop innovative, high-quality events’ (British Council, ‘Arts’, *British Council*, <<http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/arts/>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed September 2010). Perhaps even more strikingly, it is outlined on the webpage of the University of East Anglia’s famous creative writing programme that the key to writing success may be found in ‘strong gifts, considerable resilience and a certain amount of luck.’ (‘Creative Writing’, *University of East Anglia*, <<http://www.uea.ac.uk/creativewriting>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed September 2010). Here, although factors in some ways departing from the genius myth proper such as ‘resilience’ and even ‘luck’ are mentioned, it is nonetheless significant that these are hierarchically placed below the apparently most essential feature of innate ‘gifts’ (note how the elements pointed towards are of descendant importance, with ‘strong gifts’, followed by ‘considerable talent’ and finally only ‘a certain amount of luck’). Despite such thorough questionings of the very existence of inborn gifts by previously mentioned theorists such as Howe, the talent-view so closely associated with the romantic ideology thus seems to be of particular cultural resilience in institutions concerned with the formation and implementation of crucial cultural celebration and development policies.

According to the romantic, intuitive talent is innate, a gift that can be squandered but that cannot be acquired – or taught. This romanticism has a defeatist air, for it implies that the most we can do to encourage creativity is to identify the people with this special talent, and give them room to work.⁵⁵³

Or, as Chris Bilton importantly mentions in *Management and Creativity* with specific reference to issues of cultural policy: ‘According to the mythology of creative genius, the principal task of cultural policy and cultural management is simply to remove obstacles and allow talent the space and opportunity to express itself with the minimum of intervention.’⁵⁵⁴ In some ways, then, a lasting genius orientation might entail a certain governmental or organisational complacency, where nature is seen as pre-selecting the individual talents to be artistically nurtured and trained.

Also, and as implied, such a clinging to the genius myth may naturally result in a lasting celebration and enhancement of those most closely aligned with the mythical genius pattern (e.g. white, upper-middle class and, most importantly for this thesis, male). This may be done even regardless of artists’ actual work and, perhaps most crucially, often regardless of individuals’ or institutions’ best intentions.

As an example of such lastingly genius imbued practices and the way they seem to subtly perpetuate its inbuilt, pro-masculine biases, one might – for instance – allude to a scholarship for writers from all over the world yearly awarded by the Cultural Institute of Graz, Austria. This is an excerpt of its call

⁵⁵³ Boden, *The Creative Mind*, p. 5.

⁵⁵⁴ Bilton, *Management and Creativity*, p. 15.

for applications: 'It is our aim to help the development of writers who prove the ability to innovate in their work, show a strong relation to the present, high aesthetic and linguistic quality, authenticity and artistic independence.'⁵⁵⁵

When looking closely at the basic requirements for this grant, one first of all notices how these are in effect still formulated with ample reference to traditional 'genius' values such as 'innovation', 'high quality', 'authenticity' and 'independence'. Secondly, and most crucially, one might hypothesise that the very invocation of this mythical hero image – apart from possibly discouraging many women struggling with a negative form of identification from applying in the first place – has resulted in the 'casting' of almost exclusively male authors to fill the provided pattern and role. Indeed, twelve out of a total of sixteen times – a striking seventy five per cent – the scholarship has been awarded to men.

On a somewhat different level, one may also mention the example of the 2004 Cultural Policy Statement by the Scottish Cultural Commission. At a first glance, this document presents a somewhat idealistic yet nonetheless powerful incitement especially for young people to engage in artistic endeavours. As it, for instance, states: 'We will invest in the innate creativity of our young people and energise a new generation by creating an environment that encourages them to realise their cultural potential.'⁵⁵⁶ In addition, this project of creative 'energising' is apparently aimed at all social, ethnic etc. groups within Scotland, as it

⁵⁵⁵ 'Richtlinien Stadtschreiber', *Kulturserver Graz*, <http://www.kulturserver-graz.at/pdfs/richtlinien_stadtschreiberin.pdf>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed September 2010), my translation. Original in German: 'Ziel ist die Förderung von LiteratInnen, die in ihren Arbeiten Innovationsfähigkeit und Gegenwartsbezug, ästhetische und sprachliche Qualität, Authentizität und künstlerische Eigenständigkeit beweisen.' Of course one may argue that it would be extremely difficult to dispense with such criteria altogether. Nevertheless, awareness needs to be raised that the mythical, masculine impact of the genius ideology is such that, arguably, whenever its basic concepts are being invoked, they are likely to call upon male candidates as being perceived (and perceiving themselves) as most suitable for this cultural 'role'.

⁵⁵⁶ Frank McAveety, 'Cultural Policy Statement', *Cultural Commission*, <<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/culturalcommission/cultural/files/Cultural%20Policy%20Statement.pdf>>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed November 2010.

declares: ‘every citizen has the right to access and excellence in our diverse culture, and to pursue the means of fulfilling whatever talents may be within them.’⁵⁵⁷

If this strikes one as a positive example of cultural policy having utterly departed from some indirectly discriminative, genius-based practices (despite the continual reference to innate talent), the visuals of this document, unfortunately, tell a different story. For, among the photographs of young people displayed, the only one in focus and very prominently placed in front is that of a youthful white male, with pictures of a white and a black woman (although they do appear) appearing blurred in the background.⁵⁵⁸

Of course, this is by no means to suggest that the resultant message of the white man acting as the main creative artist to be ‘encouraged’ was intentional. On the contrary, it simply yet crucially goes to show how even despite the apparently best intentions (evident from the statement’s emphasis on diversity and inclusion) the mythical, patriarchal structures as contained by the genius myth can creep in to re-assert their traditional, exclusive premises. Indeed, one may argue that to counter-act this effect it would be important not only to alter the visual emphasis on men but also recognise the importance of individual circumstances and environments rather than simply celebrating individual ‘talent’.

As these examples have shown, then, there continues to be a powerful need to further question and analyse the underlying ideological premises of the genius myth and the often subliminal impositions of its charter functions.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., see especially pp. 2-3.

Preserving the myth?

At the same time, however – and for reasons this section will explore in more detail – it is of paramount importance to realise that a simple deconstruction of the genius myth (albeit clearly a first step towards a solution to some of the problems it creates) also contains its explicit dangers and should be undertaken with considerable care. For – although given the myth's gendering, 'racing' and 'classing' these have often been available only to an exclusive group – it is still crucial to recall the variety of benefits an endorsement of the ideology can provide. These might well be lost through too radical a destruction of some of the genius tale's narrative implications. Moreover, as has been mentioned, one of the reasons for the myth's notable resistance in the face of so many previous attempts to disprove it appears to be the fact that it actually responds to a multiplicity of human needs of which its operation as a masculine charter myth may only be viewed as one of the most prominent. In this sense, then, to simply aim at an eradication of it would be to risk a psycho-cultural gap which could not easily be re-filled.

The following aspects may be highlighted as potentially most significant within this context. First of all, we may remember the existent dichotomy between the myth of genius and the Writer's Dream of Wealth as two 'doctrines' of cultural production which, respectively, contain a belief in art as an essentially sublime and mysterious entity and – somewhat crudely put – a market commodity. Now, one may argue that the complete cancellation of the former could result in an ever-increasing cultural push towards the latter as the predominant, cultural ideology. As the theorist Robert Curie observes with regard to this in his work *Genius – An Ideology in Literature*:

If genius is removed from art at the same time as the artist is denied the claim to be a genius, art and indeed all culture, ceases to be transcendental and can be assessed only in this-worldly terms. Culture without genius might therefore be understood simply as entertainment. For a repudiation of the aspirations expressed in the ideology of genius might suggest that the most honest, the most satisfactory culture would be a purely instrumental culture designed to supply various convenient gratifications.⁵⁵⁹

Hence one may argue that an abandonment of the transcendental notions implicit in the genius mythology severely risks ‘reducing’ works of art to commodities designed – according to the logic of the market – simply for the gratification of different needs. That this has in part already become a powerful reality can be demonstrated by such well-known trends as the minimisation of state - and maximisation of business interventions in the arts⁵⁶⁰ and arguably also the ever-present debates of cultural instrumentalism within Cultural Policy Studies itself.

Significantly, it has to be clarified at this point that it is by no means the intention of this thesis to categorically demonise the further establishment of market regulations within the field of literature and the arts which a successful abdication of the genius myth might entail. For – apart from many other aspects such as the arguable abuse of market condemnations for a cyclical maintenance

⁵⁵⁹ Curie, *An Ideology in Literature*, p. 214.

⁵⁶⁰ As Worpole, for instance, remarks with reference to literature being increasingly relegated to market forces in his *Reading by Numbers – Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction*: ‘The Arts Council budget for literature has been cut to almost nothing, since it now firmly believes that the market will supply all our literary needs and those which it can’t supply are not worth having.’ Worpole, *Reading by Numbers*, p. 18.

of biased romantic values⁵⁶¹ – one might also argue that the literary market place has been far more receptive to the writings of women and other traditionally excluded voices than the genius myth with its multiple impeding practices discussed. This view becomes very eloquently expressed in Albert N. Greco's *The Book Publishing Industry*, where he observes:

While critics of the existing marketing system raised important issues, one must wonder about the highly romantic depiction of the 'good old days' of book publishing. One should not forget that this industry during the time period they found so endearing was essentially a white male WASP province. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans were rarely found in the corridors of power or in editorial sales meetings; and the serious literature Solotaroff and others lavishly praised concentrated primarily on their white male world, which was not filled with multicultural or feminist themes and issues.⁵⁶²

Given these notions, then, it is important not to misunderstand the previously outlined risk of 'abandoning' literature to the market through a continued diminishing of the genius ideology as a simple scenario of artistic doom.

If the literary market is thus far too multilayered (much like the genius myth itself) in its workings to be radically demonised, our previously expressed preoccupation becomes primarily based a) on the manner in which it can be seen to limit the promotion of a vast variety of points of view through literature and b)

⁵⁶¹ See, for instance, the derogatory treatment of 'chick-lit' as a 'mere market commodity' when it may actually be regarded as a highly valuable literary approach to specifically female experiences and audiences.

⁵⁶² Albert N. Greco, *The Book Publishing Industry* (London, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), p. 211.

on the lost psychological benefits of the genius myth for artist and society as mentioned before.

With regard to the former, it is a well-known fact that the market-side of the current literary landscape is increasingly shaped by the forces of globalisation, multiple mergers and an overall tendency to focus on the publication and celebration of relatively few titles and authors ideally with ‘universal appeal’. As Paul Delany, for instance, comments in his previously mentioned work *Literature, Money and the Market*:

Stability now tends to be found only at the very top, with the twenty or thirty ‘brand name’ authors that every publisher wants. Joseph Epstein reports that of the hundred bestselling books in the U.S. from 1986 to 1996, sixty-three were written by six authors. In 2000, J.K. Rowling sold four times as many books as the runner-up bestselling author.⁵⁶³

Considering this situation, it stands to reason that such a concentration on a few authors ‘every publisher wants’ almost inevitably results in the reduction of the multiple, textual worlds which can be so richly provided by literature.

As to lost psychological benefits, it has already been hinted that a full disappearance of the genius myth could also deprive many authors of the often complex pay-offs of literary productivity which may not only be regarded as an aid to their negotiation of the creative process but also an underlying incentive to become engaged with the latter in the first place. In this manner, one evidently also discovers an ambiguous yet nonetheless powerful social function of the

⁵⁶³ Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market*, p.182.

romantic ideology, in some ways helping – and we may here remember Dissanayake’s emphasis on the significance of making things special and the related status protecting functions of genius – to maintain the production of artistic works even in the absence or adversity of other operative incentive systems.

Even beyond this, however, it is crucial not to – finally – forget the psychological significance of myths for society as a whole, which the genius view has been shown to forcefully emanate within our ever more secularised world. In order to grasp the weight of this observation, one may mention two statements by theorists G.S. Kirk and Anthony Storr, both largely relying on C.G. Jung’s early studies regarding the importance of the mythical. To begin with Kirk – interpreting some of Jung’s basic observations – strongly warns that a continued tendency of ‘consigning them [myths] to the sphere of historical curiosities has merely increased the neurotic malady of modern man.’⁵⁶⁴

In a similar manner the psychoanalyst Storr places considerable emphasis on Jung’s

conclusion that everyone possesses their own ‘delusional system,’ although he did not use this terminology. He would rather have said that every man needs a myth by which to live, and that if he does not appear to possess one, he is either unconscious of it, or else sadly alienated from the roots of his being.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, p. 77.

⁵⁶⁵ Anthony Storr, *Jung* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 34.

Here, myth and ‘delusional systems’ such as the one contained by the genius ideology, become clearly conceptualised as ways of preserving psychological health.

Bearing this and the other aspects discussed throughout this section in mind, then, it might be presently concluded that to merely continue and intensify a deconstruction of the genius myth presents both a partial solution and a somewhat dangerous measure, involving both necessary benefits and new difficulties which would call for their own complex and challenging interventions.

Women, genius and complexities of deconstruction

Of course, at this stage, the question remains how one might possibly maintain the operational advantages of the genius myth without risking a connected perpetuation of its many, destructive aspects for women and other groups both within the field of literature and beyond. As at least a partial response to this question, a number of scholars – primarily belonging to feminist circles – have begun to promote a re-interpretation of the masculine ideology and/or its female counterparts in ways that may turn out to be more constructive and less harmful to women.

In this manner – although not always explicitly expressed in genius terms – a number of theorists have voiced a need to produce and/or recover a specifically female imagery of creation which has often been conceived of with relation to some of the mythology’s specifically female figures discussed, such as the procreator or, to a lesser extend, the helpmate. When exploring some of the forms this call for a female re-definition of creativity and writing has taken, one

may start with such early voices as Virginia Woolf's, who – in *A Room of One's Own* – promotes the idea that women might be better off producing different kinds of books than men:

The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work.⁵⁶⁶

Woolf therefore suggests that women adapt the very nature of their books to their female anatomy. Also, albeit it is not clear whether their lack of 'long hours of steady work' are due to some supposed lack of stamina or the numerous other commitments women tend to have in their traditional roles as procreators/helpmates, they are advised to make their very productions coherent with their female condition.

This emphasis on the female body's specific needs and semi-mythical implications on creation has continued to be addressed through numerous other theories, one of the perhaps most famous being that of the French feminist Hélène Cixous, as expressed in works such as *The Laugh of the Medusa*. In the latter, she not only urges women to make their own voices heard, but also proposes the idea that women should write 'with their body'⁵⁶⁷ and to make use of their maternal instinct for their literary creations.

⁵⁶⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.101.

⁵⁶⁷ 'Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard.' Hélène Cixous, quoted in Julie Jasken 'Introduction to Helene Cixous',

Now, on the one hand – and especially if they have been individualised (as in the case of the interview S.L., who not only resorted to a specific female imagery of creation but also decided to write *about* her insecurities) – such attempts can be very helpful for the possible recuperation and encouragement of increased female literary participation. On the other, and especially because of their generalising tendencies, such theories often seem to contain a somewhat paradoxical link to old deterministic and hierarchical dichotomies so very central to the genius ideology and its masculine charter myth function. For, at the same time as celebrating the female body and trying to re-establish its importance and place in history, both Woolf and Cixous nonetheless end up confirming old essentialist stereotypes. This may risk reducing women to their alternative mythical roles as helpmates and mothers rather than representing them in their full, female and individual potential.

Another – more directly genius related – trend with similar advantages and limitations is a discernable tendency to recuperate the traditional image of the muse for female ends. This movement can be observed in several works from different if overlapping fields such as literary studies and history of ideas, such as Mary DeShazer's *Inspiring Women - Re-imagining the Muse*,⁵⁶⁸ Mary J. Carruthers', 'The Re-vision of the Muse'⁵⁶⁹ or Penelope Murray's previously mentioned 'Reclaiming the Muse'. The latter sums up her essay's key objective in the following manner:

<http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/cixous_intro.html>, World Wide Web Publication, accessed December 2006.

⁵⁶⁸ Mary K. DeShazer, *Inspiring Women - Re-imagining the Muse* (Oxford, New York: Pergamon, 1986).

⁵⁶⁹ Mary Jay Carruthers, 'The Re-vision of the Muse, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas', in *The Hudson Review*, 36.2 (Summer 1983), pp. 293-322 [consulted at <<http://www.jstor.org/pss/3856702>> (accessed November 2010)].

What I aim to do...is to explore some of the more positive implications of the Muses' gender in the ancient sources and to highlight some moments in the history of reception when Muse imagery has been used as a means of empowering women rather than opposing them.⁵⁷⁰

Furthermore, she observes with direct reference to DeSager's contribution to this subject matter:

Through her study of the works of, for example Louise Bogan, H.D., and May Sarton, she shows how the Muse can be transformed from the traditionally passive source of inspiration for the male artist into a powerful image of female creativity. These different women writers envisage the Muse in various ways, some using motherhood as a metaphor for creativity, some invoking female lovers, others calling forth strong female figures from their literary or mythological heritage, or even becoming their own Muses, but central to their enterprise is the re-visioning of the Muse as an active rather than passive force.⁵⁷¹

Thus, several theorists have evidently developed a strong interest in the mythical counter-pattern of the muse not simply as an emblem of passive, sexualised inspiration for men, but also of specifically female ability.

Turning towards the potential and limits of such an approach, it clearly has the advantage of precisely preserving the ancient mythical richness and 'glow' associated with the imagery of muse, therefore arguably also retaining

⁵⁷⁰ Murray, 'Reclaiming the Muse', p. 330.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. p. 346-7.

some of the crucial psychological values of the mythical outlined earlier on. What is less clear, however, is whether such re-interpretations can truly transform the muse into a convincing and sufficiently multilayered image of female empowerment. For not only is it a little hard to lastingly ignore the overall connotations of the muse as in many ways secondary to the genius artist, but one also cannot help worrying about the almost fully metaphysical nature of this creature. Indeed, whereas the genius seems to precisely draw some of its charter myth power from its physicality – its associations with the male *body* and its ‘incarnation’ in countless historical ‘geniuses’ – the muse has been predominantly conceived of as a spiritual presence. In this manner, then, it risks becoming a symbol that – not unlike the paradoxical Christian figure of the mother-virgin Mary – robs women of their physical nature at the same time as supposedly celebrating and enabling them in their complex totality.

On another plane, some theorists have – interestingly – also argued for the actual deployment of the genius myth itself for potentially feminist purposes. In this manner, Christine Battersby, for instance, declares towards the end of her *Gender and Genius*, how she strongly beliefs in the value of

appropriating the vocabulary of genius for feminist ends. Since we can’t stop journalists or popular historians from using the word ‘genius’ – or from recycling the concept through fuzzy notions of ‘creativity’, ‘originality’ or simply artistic ‘greatness’ – we have to join in, and project our own artistic values by picking out female ‘geniuses’.⁵⁷²

⁵⁷² Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 156.

Part of this scheme – according to Battersby – is, naturally, the continued recovery of ‘lost’ female writers, as discussed in Chapter Three, and the reinstatement of women creators in cultural history by ‘treating their works with the care and respect that we accord to the individuality of (white) males.’⁵⁷³

In some ways such a project has, for instance, been conducted by Julia Kristeva in her previously mentioned trilogy *Female Genius* which presents an in-depth analysis of the three culturally crucial female figures of Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein and Colette. During the course of this work, it in effect seems that Kristeva aims to ‘appropriate the vocabulary of genius for feminist ends’, above all in an apparent plea of transferring the notion of individuality so central to the myth of genius to future concepts of femininity. As such, she explains how

what interested me as I lived with Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette, was, I repeat, not to note how they are like all women but how each of them, against the backdrop of that common condition, modulated an original and unprecedented advance.⁵⁷⁴

Or as she adds, using genius as an emblem of the individuality and individual opportunities she ultimately celebrates:

With their sexual, social and political liberation, women have taken the stage in the various fields of knowledge and skill in the modern Commonwealth, which has raised the question of their equality with or difference from men. Such was the major inquiry of the twentieth

⁵⁷³ Ibid., p. 160.

⁵⁷⁴ Kristeva, *Female Genius*, p. 425.

century. By contrast, the third millennium will be that of individual opportunities, or it will be nothing at all.⁵⁷⁵

Here, then, the female genius becomes a representative of the individual natures and capacities of women and from there – outward – of a general trend for human growth and development to be desired.⁵⁷⁶

This approach of redeveloping the genius myth for *women*, evidently has the advantage (as Battersby, in particular, highlights when she declares that ‘we can’t stop journalists or popular historians from using the word “genius”’) of allowing for concrete feminist interventions without any ‘utopian’ claims of immediately and radically toppling over persistent romantic assumptions about creativity and creators. In addition, this renewed version may indeed partially perform the complicated double act of helping to preserve and at the same time widening some of the myth’s multiple benefits.

Nevertheless, as Battersby also explicitly recognises⁵⁷⁷ – and not unlike the matter of re-instating the muse as presented earlier on – the mere superimposition of women onto such a profoundly masculine framework naturally also carries a considerable number of risks. This may already be observed with regard to the fact – as outlined in the third chapter of this thesis – that Kristeva herself ends up promoting the idea of ‘genius overcoming all

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 426.

⁵⁷⁶ One may add that this view places Kristeva into the context of a general, observable trend in contemporary feminism. As the gender theorist Elaine Storkey highlights in her work *Origins of Difference*, with specific regard to Luce Irigaray: ‘Each woman has to discover her own subjectivity, stripped away from all the years of patriarchal interpretation, and she must do it as herself, in her own particularity, not as some inaccessible universal “woman”.’ Storkey, *Origins of Difference*, p. 56.

⁵⁷⁷ In effect, the above presented quote from her work continues in the following manner: ‘I am aware, of course, that exploiting the language of “genius” for feminist ends is awkward and (even) dangerous. To use the term “genius” at all, feminists need to understand the history of the concept, and must also distinguish the separate notions of genius that have become muddled in the course of that history.’ Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, p. 156.

obstacles' which can be so easily abused as an affirmation of the genius myth's pro-masculine narrative moral. What is more, this deployment of the romantic ideology for 'feminist ends' may also inadvertently push an increase of 'alien identification' among women, inviting them to identify and be identified with what will always be, at its historical and hence connotative core, a male category.

All presented intents of retaining the genius imagery while changing its profoundly gendered associations thus have been shown to reveal considerable potential as well as powerful risks and limitations.

Reconstructing

So – given this notable difficulty of successfully changing the charter myth workings of genius in favour of the male creator – what other useful trends or interventions might there exist? Let us approach this final concern from a variety of angles, including both directly applicable (and/or already applied) or idealistic (yet nonetheless necessary) solutions.

Starting with measures which operate mainly on an inward level, one possible intervention would be the introduction/increase of programmes which thoroughly train (aspiring) writers on a psychological level. Many of the ever-growing number of creative writing courses appear to predominantly focus on the development of technical skills such as character and plot construction. Thus, it might prove valuable to also approach the challenges of novel writing from a psychological point of view, boosting authors' confidence, resilience towards rejection, tolerance of primary processing, among many more. For returning to Dorothea Brande's significant observation from *Becoming a Writer*: 'the difficulties of the average student or amateur writer begin long before he has

come to the place where he can benefit by technical instruction in story writing.⁵⁷⁸ Naturally, given the main conclusions of this thesis, such courses may turn out to be of particular relevance to female writers, assisting them with problems of negative identification, a resultant lack of confidence and the multiplicity of other arising difficulties analysed.

Similar steps could be taken on an individual level through specific counselling and coaching sessions for writers. Here, apart from working to develop internal 'skills' such as those mentioned before, this form of intense one-to-one contact between writers and counsellors would also allow for the search of individual solutions to individual artistic difficulties.⁵⁷⁹ Among these, it could – for instance – focus on a careful deconstruction (especially for women) of existent mythical types and promote the value of personalised myth. They can help writers develop appealing imagery or tales which respond precisely to their particular problems and strengths. Whether or not these then contain a specifically gendered element, as in the case of the feminine mythology deployed by the case study writer S.L. would, naturally, also be up to the needs of the individual in question. Also, this form of coaching could emphasise this thesis' working aesthetic of personal originality as a way of enhancing writers' belief in their own experience and vision of the world and therefore, arguably, also their general sense of confidence and (internal) motivation. One may add that, even though some forms of artistic counselling do, of course, already exist, such measures would nevertheless also call for more extensive training of therapists within this particular field.

⁵⁷⁸ See previous footnote Chapter Six, Brande, *Becoming a Writer*, p. 21.

⁵⁷⁹ Indeed, even though some forms of specific creativity counselling already do exist, many writers have complained that more traditional forms of therapy such as psychoanalysis are unfit for them, treating their creative urges as a form of pathology rather than a valid wish to be pushed and enhanced.

On a more external level and as a response to the manifold forms of outward discrimination against women writers, I believe it would – given the current state of affairs – be of value to continue and extend separatist practices which aim at opening up spaces for women within a lastingly male dominated literary system. To provide some examples of such practices already in operation, one may refer to previously mentioned all-women publishing houses such as Virago or the *Orange Prize for Fiction*, with their respective policies of publishing and rewarding works exclusively written by women.

Now, while people seem to have become used to the by now long established existence of all-female editorial enterprises, the more recent project of the *Orange Prize* has been in the crossfire of a lively controversy. It has been criticised by men and women alike, identified, for instance, as a ‘sexist con-trick’ by writer Tim Lott or by novelist A.S. Byatt as ‘ghettoising’ women.⁵⁸⁰

Looked at from an idealistic point of view, it seems self-evident that such an explicitly gender-exclusive initiative as the *Orange Prize* is fraught with difficult implications, in many ways perpetuating women’s role as a literary ‘other’ to the normative male. On the other hand, and parting not from the way gender should be dealt with in an ideal world but within the reality of all the existent discriminative practices addressed in this thesis and beyond, it strikes one as lastingly necessary to create a deliberate cultural counterweight. Remembering previously presented statistics that all supposedly ‘general’ review papers are actually normatively masculine and that other crucial literary awards such as the Nobel Prize show a persistently male dominance, it appears to be fair

⁵⁸⁰ Tim Lott and A.S. Byatt quoted in Katy Guest, ‘The Big Question – Has the Time Come to Close the Book on Women-Only Literary Prizes’, *The Independent*, 6 June 2008 [consulted at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-big-question-has-the-time-come-to-close-the-book-on-womenonly-literary-prizes-841352.html>> (accessed January 2011)].

to install a prize which grants a comparable, if controversially explicit, favouritism to women. Of course, as soon as there is real cause to rejoice in a new equality in the way literature by men and women is treated – but only then – the need for such a woman-only award (as well as for other separatist initiatives) would disappear. For the moment, however, it might be helpful for such initiatives to actually become extended, as well as for the rationales behind them to become even more powerfully disseminated and known.

In direct relation to this, the arguably most important and at the same time most profoundly idealistic step to be taken to counteract the gendered workings of the genius myth would be a more thorough re-evaluation and celebration of individual female existences and experiences, both within the literary field and beyond. In fact, even the *Orange Prize* with its explicit aim to ‘celebrate women writers’ also becomes an interesting example of the lasting limitations of such re-valuing attempts, notably focusing on the ambiguously gendered genre of ‘serious literature’ and ignoring many popular works by women often downgraded (as we have seen) in connection to their femininity. As such, we already notice how a true and lastingly effective celebration of women and their writing would have to eventually involve a more thorough questioning of thematic and genre-related hierarchies; for only if these genius-imbued categories change, can we expect any real alterations for women.

Furthermore, it seems that both misogynist and feminist tendencies have, occasionally, gone hand in hand in their tendency to restrict the perceived value of female experience, the former often leaning on visions of a traditional and the latter on the necessary project of a ‘new’ womanhood. As a result, an objective of truly revaluing women in our literature and society would have to involve a

ready engagement with all kinds of lived female thoughts and experiences which goes beyond ideological trends to learn what actually happens in and to women's bodies and minds. Naturally, this would involve the co-operation of a vast number of writers, readers and individuals in general, ready to expose and expose themselves to (their) alternative realities, with their potentially revolutionary implications. For, as Carol Gilligan emphasises in *In A Different Voice* (with regard to a female psychology but also directly applicable to the literary world) the production and reading of more works 'in which girls and women are seen and heard' poses 'an inevitable challenge to the patriarchal order that can remain in place only through the continuing eclipse of women's experience.'⁵⁸¹

It is through such – complex – measures, then, that one can hope to eventually undermine the cultural double-essentialism encoded in the charter myth of genius. Its deterministic and hierarchical vision of creativity and gender roles needs to give way to an understanding of the underlying dynamism of the creative process and gender identities, ideologically freeing them both to be adapted, changed and – for the general well-being – improved.

⁵⁸¹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice, Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1993, c1982), p. xxiv.

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Appendix:

Sample Questionnaire

(used as overall guidance for interviews)

Interviewee’s writing life and habits:

- 1.) Name, Age, Occupation etc..

- 2.) What do you write and what have been your greatest writing achievements so far?
- 3.) What does your 'writing life' look like? Do you write as often as you would like?
- 4.) What have been the biggest writing difficulties/obstacles for you? (Face-to-face interview: Could you draw them?)
- 5.) What have been the biggest helps? (Face-to-face interview: Could you draw them?)
- 6.) Has there been anyone who particularly encouraged you to write? If yes, how important has this been for you?
- 7.) Do you often have self-doubts regarding writing? If yes, do they motivate/de-motivate you or neither?
- 8.) Do you think self-confidence is important for your writing?
- 9.) What is your attitude towards the revision of your texts? Do you revise a lot/ a little/not at all...?
- 10.) Do you feel you have a "right to write" or does this sometimes pose a problem for you?
- 11.) What motivates/ de-motivates you most?
- 12.) Are you scared of the reception/criticism of your work? Why (not)?

Interviewee's genius endorsement:

- 1.) Do you believe in talent? If yes, how would you define it? If you believe in it, how important is the idea for your writing? If not, why not?

- 2.) Do you believe in the idea of artistic vocation? If yes, how would you define it and which form does it take in your life? If not, why not?
- 3.) Do you believe in inspiration? If yes, which form does it take in your writing life? If not, why not?
- 4.) Do you believe in the existence of artistic genius? (Face to face interview: Could you draw one?). If yes, who would be an example of a genius, within the literary world or in general? If yes, which features do you think a genius possesses? Do you identify with any of those? If yes, which?
- 5.) Do you think there are crucial differences between male and female writers? If yes, which?
- 6.) Would you like to add anything?